

JOHNSON OVER  
JORDAN

*Plays by J. B. Priestley*

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DANGEROUS CORNER

LABURNUM GROVE

THE ROUNDABOUT

CORNELIUS

EDEN END

DUET IN FLOODLIGHT

BEEES ON THE BOAT DECK

TIME AND THE CONWAYS

I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE

PEOPLE AT SEA

JOHNSON OVER JORDAN

# JOHNSON OVER JORDAN

THE PLAY  
AND ALL ABOUT IT  
(AN ESSAY)

BY  
J. B. PRIESTLEY



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LONDON                    ::                    TORONTO

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FIRST PUBLISHED JUNE 1939  
REPRINTED JULY 1939

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT THE WINDMILL PRESS  
KINGSWOOD, SURREY



DEDICATED

WITH THANKS AND GOOD WISHES  
TO ALL WHO SHARED WITH ME  
THIS ADVENTURE OF THE THEATRE



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*Photographs by Angus McBean*

# JOHNSON OVER JORDAN

## A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

NOTE.—*This is a reading and not an acting version of the play, and I have tried to describe to the reader what he would see if he were witnessing a performance of the play. On the other hand, both action and dialogue are exactly as they were at the Saville Theatre; nothing in the dialogue has been omitted or added for the sake of a better reading text; and I ask the reader to remember that this is a play for a theatre and not for a library.*

J. B. P.

## ACT ONE

After some music, which begins fiercely and frighteningly and then sinks into a funereal melancholy, we find ourselves looking at the hall of ROBERT JOHNSON'S house, somewhere in one of the pleasanter outer suburbs. There is not much to be seen: a door in the centre that probably leads into the drawing-room, and on one side of it a small table and a chair or two, and on the other side one of those tall stands for hats and overcoats and sticks. What impresses us is the atmosphere in here. It is at once cold and shuttered. There is something chill and uneasy about the very light. Something is wrong; this is no ordinary morning; and then we realise what we are in for when AGNES the maid, in black and rather red about the eyes, comes in followed by two or three middle-aged persons all in black, whom she shows into the drawing-room. Yes, they are mourners, and they are about to attend a little funeral service in the house before the remains of ROBERT JOHNSON are taken to the cemetery. We gather from the murmur of voices that these mourners are among the last, not the first, to arrive.

When AGNES has shown these people in, she looks

hesitatingly at the tall stand where the hats and coats are, makes up her mind what to do, then with rather furtive haste takes some things from the stand. A middle-aged undertaker's man, who spends nearly every morning in this strange atmosphere, has now entered, and, after giving a quick glance at his watch, is now observing AGNES.

UNDERTAKER'S MAN. Them things his?

AGNES (*sniffily, whispering*). Yes. I'm taking 'em out. I'm taking 'em out. I'm sure it'll upset Mrs. Johnson seeing 'em here. I know it would me. 'Ats and sticks—and he's gorn.

UNDERTAKER'S MAN (*who has to be a bit of a philosopher*). That's right. And them things lasts longer than we do, see? Makes you think a bit, that does, eh? But don't be too long putting 'em away. We ought to be starting soon.

(AGNES goes one way with her little pile of hats and coats and does not notice that a glove has fallen on the floor. The UNDERTAKER'S MAN does not notice the glove because now, after looking again at his watch, he has gone the other way, only to return the next moment with an elderly clergyman, all ready for the service.)

UNDERTAKER'S MAN. Along 'ere, sir. I think they're all in but the family—and the family's upstairs waiting to come down.

CLERGYMAN (*rather impatiently*). Yes, yes. Well, we ought to begin quite soon.

UNDERTAKER'S MAN (*who often has to soothe clergymen*). Shan't be two minutes now, sir. In here, sir.

(*After showing the CLERGYMAN where to go, he goes off where AGNES went. The family must have been waiting for him to tell them all is ready, for now they come on, slowly, miserably, in deepest black. There is MRS. JOHNSON, whose name is Jill, who is looking so terribly distressed that we cannot tell anything about her except that she is a woman in her late forties. She is supported, physically as well as morally, by her mother, MRS. GREGG, who must be well on into her sixties and has now attended many funerals. Closely behind them come the two children: RICHARD, a nice-looking lad in his early twenties, and FRED A, a handsome girl a year or two younger; and they are both making a desperate effort to carry it off well. Just as this little procession nears the door, JILL sees the glove that AGNES dropped, gives a little cry, and picks it up.*)

MRS. GREGG. Never mind that. It's nothing, dear.

JILL (*who knows better*). It's his glove—all—that's left of him.

(*This is too much for her and she sobs convulsively.*

MRS. GREGG and the children try to comfort her, while the UNDERTAKER'S MAN hovers behind them.)

MRS. GREGG (*who had her doubts before*). Perhaps

you'd better not attend the service, after all, Jill.

JILL (*struggling to be calm*). No, mother, I'll be all right. I'm sorry. It was seeing that glove—so suddenly, like that—on the floor—as if people had been walking over it——

RICHARD. Don't think about it, Mother—please. We just haven't to think, this morning, that's all.

JILL (*still struggling*). I'll be sensible.

(*The UNDERTAKER'S MAN has now crossed to open the door for them, and his manner suggests that though he has every sympathy with MRS. JOHNSON, he must point out that the morning's grim programme must be got through in reasonable time.*)

UNDERTAKER'S MAN. They're all ready when you are, Mrs. Johnson.

(*So JILL makes a last effort and in she goes, with the family, while the UNDERTAKER'S MAN holds the door open, then almost closes it, and goes tip-toeing away. After a moment's wait, we hear the CLERGYMAN beginning the service in there: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. . . ." But before we have time to ask ourselves what these strange words really mean, two late mourners have entered the hall. The first is MR. CLAYTON, a spruce, rotund, prosperous old gentleman, and the other is GEORGE NOBLE, a middle-*



*aged, conventional sort of chap, both in formal mourning. MR. CLAYTON goes to the door, listens a moment, then closes it carefully, and joins NOBLE, who has been waiting hesitantly. Now they stand close together and talk in that rather sideways manner, with a loudish whisper, which indicates they are embarrassed. But they are men of the world and will make the best of it.)*

CLAYTON. They've begun the service in there. No good going in now, eh?

NOBLE. Rather not. Wait until it's over, eh?

CLAYTON (*nodding, then somewhat abruptly*). Can't say I mind myself. Don't take much stock in these services, y'know. Comforting to the women, of course. Meeting in Heaven—and all that, eh? But if you ask me—when you're dead that's the end of you.

NOBLE (*who hasn't given it much thought*). I shouldn't be surprised.

CLAYTON. Like to pay last respects, though. Knew poor Johnson very well. Did you?

NOBLE. Yes. Cousin. Noble's my name.

CLAYTON. Ah yes. Mine's Clayton.

NOBLE (*with increased respect now*). I've heard poor Robert talk about you, Mr. Clayton. Chairman of the Board at his firm, aren't you?

CLAYTON (*rather glad of a chat*). Yes. Remember Johnson coming to us as a junior clerk, thirty years ago. Worked his way up steadily. We thought a lot

of him. Great loss to the firm. So young too. Fifty?

NOBLE. Just about. Fifty-one, I fancy.

CLAYTON. No age at all. And went off—like that. Wasn't in bed a week. Pneumonia, of course.

NOBLE. You never can tell, can you? And I'd have called Robert a pretty careful sort of chap.

CLAYTON. So would I. Careful, steady fellow, who always understood his responsibilities. That's why we liked him. Not easy to replace, I'll tell you.

NOBLE. Bad luck all round. Happily married too. And nice boy and nice girl, still very young. All comfortable, nicely settled.

CLAYTON (*rather indignantly*). And suddenly goes—like that! And I can give him twenty years. No sense in it. No sense in it at all.

*(They do not say any more because now the UNDERTAKER'S MAN comes in and listens at the door. This reminds them that a funeral service is going on in there, and they are obviously embarrassed as they watch the man go out again.)*

CLAYTON (*dropping his voice a little*). Better wait outside, I think, now, eh?

NOBLE (*relieved at the suggestion*). Just what I was going to suggest. Shouldn't like to be caught just standing here.

*(So out they go, slowly, with unnecessary caution, and now the door opens, not because the service is over but because RICHARD is there, opening it, ready to sneak*

*away himself but also to give his sister FREDa, who is taking it very hard in there, a chance to slip out and recover. We do not see her, however, but only just catch this glimpse of RICHARD, for now the lights are beginning to fade and through the growing dusk comes the voice of the CLERGYMAN continuing the service: "For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain: he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them. . . ."*

*Now it is completely dark and the music has begun again, but it does not continue long in that strain but changes into something quicker and fiercer. Obviously the real Johnson is not lying in that oak box which the UNDERTAKER'S MAN is now having conveyed to the waiting hearse. What is happening to the real Johnson? Just as we are wondering this, we see him. That is all we see—JOHNSON'S face strongly illuminated against a background of darkness. He is talking away in an odd confused manner, like a man in a delirium.)*

JOHNSON. . . . They can say what they like, but I've a high old temperature. . . . Look at the way things bend and waver and then go floating about. . . . That's not normal. . . . And corridors . . . long corridors . . . far too many long corridors. . . . I noticed some corridors when they brought me in—you can't have a big nursing-home without corridors—but not as many as all that—and not so long. . . .

And a pretty penny this'll cost us before I'm out again. . . . Fifteen guineas a week for the room, at least . . . then the doctors . . . and extras—all sorts of nonsense—and charge you the earth for 'em. . . . Minute you take to your bed, money's poured out like water. . . . Lucky I've been careful. . . . Whatever happens, Jill ought to be all right. . . . Never missed paying a premium . . . good company . . . one of the biggest and best insurance companies in the world. . . . They oughtn't to try any tricks with her. . . . I'll see they don't. . . . Better write to 'em myself . . . good stiff letter. . . . No nonsense. . . . Miss Francis. . . . Miss Francis . . . want you to take a letter . . .

*(He appears to imagine he is back in his own office, and so calls for his secretary. In the world he is in now, a world we ourselves visit in dreams, you do not call in vain for anybody or anything, though the results are apt to get out of control. That is what happens now. We see that four secretaries, blank-faced girls all wearing tortoise-shell glasses and dressed alike, have grouped themselves round JOHNSON so that he sees one whichever way he turns. They carry note-books, and indeed the lights that show us their faces seem to come from these note-books.)*

JOHNSON. Ah, there you are, Miss Francis.

FIRST GIRL. Yes, Mr. Johnson.

JOHNSON (*rather wearily*). Want you to take a letter.

SECOND GIRL. Yes, Mr. Johnson.

JOHNSON (*making an effort*). An important letter . . . to the Universal Insurance Company . . .

THIRD GIRL. Yes, Mr. Johnson.

JOHNSON (*after slight pause, tired*). . . . "Dear Sirs . . ."

FOURTH GIRL. Yes, Mr. Johnson?

JOHNSON (*confusedly*). No, no . . . doesn't matter . . . you needn't bother, Miss Francis . . . cancel that letter.

ALL FOUR GIRLS. Yes, Mr. Johnson.

(*And all four quietly disappear, while JOHNSON tries to collect himself.*)

JOHNSON. No, no . . . letter won't do . . . that was what Mr. Clayton always said, and he was right. . . . If you want to do business, go and do it yourself, face-to-face. . . . Quite right. . . . If I want my money, no use merely writing letter. . . . They get millions of letters. . . . Only thing to do is to go for the money myself. . . . My money, isn't it? . . . All honestly earned—years of hard work. . . . Just say to them "Look here, I want my money. . . . As one business man to another, what about my money?" . . . Forms to fill in—red tape—only to be expected, big company like that—enormous business—tremendous organisation. . . . May have a little difficulty . . . business man myself, so quite understand. . . . But I must have my money. . . .

(*As soon as he has said this, the music bursts into a fast, clattering, nattering, nervy strain, and we see*

*that JOHNSON is now surrounded by a number of clerks and secretaries, male and female, who are all busy exchanging documents, making notes, and so on, making very quick movements in a stylised fashion. Moreover, they are lit from below, and it is not easy to see them properly and they throw big confusing shadows. The total effect is irritating and then exhausting, as if we had been given a whole modern business man's day within one minute. And now through the clatter comes a loud, harsh, impersonal voice from a loud-speaker, bellowing: "The time is four-twenty-five—four-twenty-five. All forms K.R.T. three-seven-nine to be returned to Room Eighty-two by four-thirty-five. All forms K.R.T. three-seven-nine to be returned to Room Eighty-two by four-thirty-five. The time is now four-twenty-six." And now the ballet of clerks hurries off. JOHNSON tries to stop the last of them but is not successful.*

*The whole scene is now illuminated by a hard white light, almost dazzling. It is quite a big and high room, with enormous silvery swing doors at each side, and in the middle, the only furniture it has, a tremendous silvery desk raised on a dais, with a very big swivel chair at each side and one at the back. In front is a kind of settee made of the same silvery material. It all looks very modern, efficient and opulent, and quite inhuman. Seated in the big chairs*

*at each side of the desk are two old men, worried old men with white hair, tinted spectacles, morning coats, and the look of dyspeptic millionaires. They have forms and enormous ledger-like volumes in front of them, and they turn the pages of these volumes in a quick desperate sort of fashion. High above the desk is one of those clocks that have no works and no compassion for our frailties, and above the clock is hanging a horrible white cluster of loud speakers.*

*JOHNSON, whom we now see clearly as a pleasant fellow in a dark business suit, looks at all this in bewilderment, then cautiously approaches the first old man, who is too busy to notice his existence.)*

JOHNSON. Pardon me, sir, but would you mind telling me——

FIRST OLD MAN (*looking up, testily*). I'm very busy, you know, my dear sir, very busy indeed.

JOHNSON (*taken aback*). Sorry! (*He goes round to the Second.*) I wonder, sir, if you'd mind——

SECOND OLD MAN (*looking up, annoyed*). What is it then, what is it?

JOHNSON (*apologetically*). Well, you see, I don't seem to remember how I got here——

(FIRST OLD MAN *looks up and makes a tut-tutting noise.*)

I was in bed—as a matter of fact I wasn't feeling very well—had quite a temperature—and then—well——

SECOND OLD MAN (*who has no time for this stuff*). Then what?

JOHNSON (*who cannot help being vague about it*). Well, that's all I remember. Mu't have slipped out somehow and come along here. Loss of memory, I suppose. Nuisance! Making a fool of myself! Don't even know what I want here.

FIRST OLD MAN (*who does not need even to look up for this*). Of course you do. You want your money. Wouldn't be here if you didn't.

JOHNSON. My money?

FIRST OLD MAN (*now condescending to look up*). Yes, of course. You want your money. I want *my* money.

SECOND OLD MAN (*who won't be left out*). And I want *my* money.

FIRST OLD MAN. We all want our money, don't we? Come, come, don't be childish, my dear sir.

JOHNSON (*apologetically*). Sorry! But you see—I can't remember. I was ill, y'know—really ill. I overheard the doctor——

FIRST OLD MAN. Don't bother me with doctors. Plenty here if you want one.

SECOND OLD MAN. Wonderful medical staff here. But they won't get you your money, will they?

FIRST OLD MAN (*willing to stop work for a chat about money*). How much are you expecting?

JOHNSON (*who cannot help feeling that this is pretty good*). Oh—well—several thousands, y'know.



FIRST OLD MAN (*contemptuously*). Several thousands!

SECOND OLD MAN (*perhaps the worse of the two, sniggering*). One thousand, two thousand, three thousand!

(*The two ancient and desiccated monsters cackle together and point contemptuously at poor JOHNSON, who watches them spread themselves in their chairs now.*)

JOHNSON. I don't see anything particularly funny about it.

FIRST OLD MAN. I cleared two hundred and fifty thousand on Consolidated Copper.

SECOND OLD MAN. I made a cool three hundred and fifty thousand out of National Nickel.

FIRST OLD MAN. I netted four hundred and fifty thousand out of International Iron.

SECOND OLD MAN. I cashed in for five hundred and fifty thousand out of Standard Steel.

FIRST OLD MAN (*to finish this off*). I wrote to the directors here and told 'em that to save time I'd accept, in settlement of my claim, one million and seven hundred and fifty thousand.

SECOND OLD MAN (*to go one better*). "Gentlemen," I wrote, "we are men of few words. I'll make no further demands on you if you give me your cheque for two millions."

(*JOHNSON, who has been sitting on the settee in front of the desk, turning to listen to first one and then the other, is now only about half the size he was at the beginning of this duet. He rises and walks*

*round to the back of the desk, regarding the two old men with bewildered awe.)*

JOHNSON. Well, of course, I don't wonder you were amused. This is big business, altogether out of my depth. I've heard and read about these transactions, but I've never been mixed up in them. You see, the firm I've been with all the time is just an old-fashioned firm of East India merchants—a good sound business, of course—but——

FIRST OLD MAN (*who has been looking at his form, and now interrupts ruthlessly*). What was the National Debt in Nineteen Hundred and Seven?

JOHNSON (*bewildered*). I don't know. Why?

FIRST OLD MAN (*consulting his form*). It says here—question thirty-four in sub-section K.—deduct your personal expenditure for the first quarter of Nineteen Hundred and Seven from the National Debt of that year—but see Note 645 D. (*He looks for this.*) Omit in calculation of Debt half-yearly interest due on Consols. But see note on repayment of Indian Loans. (*He searches wildly, then cries in despair.*) I'll never do it. They know I'll never do it. They want to keep my money.

(JOHNSON, *who is now sitting in the chair at the back of the desk, stares at him in amazement, while the worried old man turns pages over and plunges wildly into calculations. The second one now raises a despairing voice.*)

SECOND OLD MAN. Brazilian Railways! Brazilian Railways! Add all dividends to British investors in Brazilian Railways from 1895 onwards. (*Turning to form again.*) But omit all earnings of Anglo-Brazilian Investment Corporation. (*Adds in despair to the other two.*) There won't be time again, you'll see. Then I'll have to start all over again, with another form—quite different.

FIRST OLD MAN (*miserably*). They're determined to keep our money.

SECOND OLD MAN (*suddenly changing his tone*). What are you going to do with your money when you do get it?

FIRST OLD MAN (*looking up, not uninterested*). I'm going to—er—to—oh, there was something—but I've forgotten.

SECOND OLD MAN (*proudly*). I have the second-best collection of Eighteenth Century French snuff-boxes in the world. Museum pieces all of them.

FIRST OLD MAN (*testily*). You told me. Let's get on, let's get on. No time to waste. (*And they plunge into work again.*)

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. Only seventeen more minutes for Forms G.T.O. Seventy-six to Four hundred and nine. Only seventeen more minutes for Forms G.T.O. Seventy-six to Four hundred and nine.

FIRST OLD MAN (*wildly*). Did they say from Seventy-six to Four hundred and nine?

JOHNSON. Yes.

FIRST OLD MAN. Mine's G.T.O. Three-twenty-five. That means I've only seventeen more minutes.

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER (*with sharp hint of correction*). Sixteen and a half minutes. (*The old man works like fury.*) Robert Johnson!

JOHNSON (*startled, jumping up*). Yes?

(*He looks at the loud-speaker as if expecting a reply from it, but what happens is that a clerk, not one of the posturing youngsters we have seen already but a solid, middle-aged, authoritative fellow, marches in, moving straight towards the SECOND OLD MAN, who is also buried in his ledger and forms.*)

JOHNSON (*noticing the CLERK*). Oh—I say——

CLERK (*firmly*). Just a minute, please. (*To the SECOND OLD MAN*). Have you completed your form of application?

SECOND OLD MAN (*desperately*). Nearly, nearly, shan't be a minute, shan't be a minute. I'm not as young as I was, remember. My eyes bother me. Yes, don't forget that.

(*He tries to retain the form, but the CLERK firmly takes it from him and looks at it with contempt.*)

CLERK. You'd better come with me. (*The old man rises sadly.*)

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER (*severely*). All reference books to be returned to the office library.

(*The SECOND OLD MAN takes up his ledger and*

*follows the CLERK out. JOHNSON watches all this with growing dismay. The FIRST OLD MAN, who has been working very hard with his form and huge volume, is now suddenly triumphant.)*

FIRST OLD MAN. I've got it. At last I've got it. (*But one of the young clerks, repeating the phrase about reference books going back to the library, hurries in to take the book from the FIRST OLD MAN, who flings down his form and pen and buries his head in his hands in complete despair.*)

JOHNSON (*with concern*). Look here, can I do anything for you?

FIRST OLD MAN (*looking up, cynically*). What! And then claim a share in my money. Not likely! You don't catch me that way. Oh no!

JOHNSON (*indignantly*). I didn't want to catch you. And I don't want your money.

FIRST OLD MAN. That's what *you* say. And then you wouldn't want a twenty-five per cent interest afterwards, would you? Oh no, not at all! My dear sir, I'm a business man, and I learned how to look after myself before you were born.

JOHNSON (*beginning to be sceptical*). I wonder.

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. Forms G.T.O. Three hundred to Three hundred and fifty, whether completed or not, must be returned at once to Room Forty-five.

FIRST OLD MAN (*desperately*). I won't go. I won't go.

*(But now the CLERK enters, carrying a long form, and looks sternly at the old man.)*

CLERK (*firmly*). Room Forty-nine.

FIRST OLD MAN. No. This is the hundred and seventeenth time.

CLERK. Room Forty-nine at once, please.

*(The old man goes out wearily and the CLERK is following him when he is stopped by JOHNSON, who is now losing his patience.)*

JOHNSON. Now—look here——

CLERK (*briskly, consulting form*). Robert Johnson?

JOHNSON. Yes, that's my name.

CLERK (*checking details from the form*). Aged fifty. Married and two children, son and daughter. Manager for Messrs. Bolt, Cross and Clayton, East India Merchants.

JOHNSON. Yes. But——

CLERK (*cutting in*). Here's your form.

*(He hands over the form, then turns away, but this is not good enough for JOHNSON, who stops him, not far from one of the big office doors.)*

JOHNSON (*with the remnant of his patience*). Just a moment, please.

CLERK (*unpleasantly*). We're busy here, you know, very busy. Listen!

*(He opens the nearest door, and we hear the clatter of a very large office—typewriters, adding machines,*

*ringing of bells, etc. But now JOHNSON really loses his temper.)*

JOHNSON (*shouting angrily*). I don't care how busy you are. I want to know something.

CLERK (*very civil now*). Certainly, Mr. Johnson. What is it?

JOHNSON. I want to know where I am. What *is* this place?

CLERK. Central offices of the Universal Assurance and Globe Loan and Finance Corporation. Where you get your money.

JOHNSON (*remembering*). Ah—yes, of course. My money.

CLERK (*smiling*). We all have to have money, haven't we? Can't do without that.

JOHNSON (*rather confusedly*). No, of course not. But—the trouble is, you see—well, I must have lost my memory. . . . I've been ill. . . . I was in bed—yes, in a nursing-home . . . doctors coming all the time . . . two nurses . . . everybody looking worried. . . . I must have wandered out somehow. . . .

CLERK (*with the air of one dealing with a child*). Quite so. Well, all you have to do is to fill in your form properly and then we give you your money. You can't get out of here until you have your money, so of course you have to stay here until you've filled in your form properly.

JOHNSON (*rather dubiously*). Yes—well—that's

reasonable enough. Filled in plenty of forms in my time—all kinds—(*glances at the huge form in his hand.*) Pretty elaborate sort of thing, though—isn't it? Complicated questions. Is—er—all this necessary?

CLERK. Most certainly. You must concentrate, Mr. Johnson, concentrate.

JOHNSON. I'll do my best.

CLERK. And our examiners will be here in a moment.

JOHNSON (*who doesn't like the sound of this*). What examiners?

CLERK. For the usual preliminary questions. Meanwhile, Mr. Johnson, I advise you to take a good look at your form.

(*He goes out.* JOHNSON *walks slowly to the chair at the back of the desk, sits down and stares in bewilderment at the pages of complicated questions. As he stares he pulls a pipe out and sticks it into his mouth. Immediately the voice from the loud-speaker says severely: "No smoking in the office before five-fifteen."* After giving the loud-speaker a startled glance, JOHNSON *puts the pipe away. He tries to apply himself to the form, but now the lights change, the ballet of clerks and secretaries comes rushing in, making strange shadows, and we hear again their strident nervous music. When these clerks and secretaries have gone and the brilliant white lights pour down on the desk again, we discover that the EXAMINERS have arrived, and are*



*standing one on each side of JOHNSON, who is still seated. They are exactly alike, these EXAMINERS, tall and rotund figures, dressed in frock coats, with bald pink heads and round pink shaven faces and large spectacles. They carry note-books. JOHNSON looks at them in astonishment touched with horror, as well he might.)*

FIRST EXAMINER (*announcing himself*). First Examiner.

SECOND EXAMINER (*announcing himself*). Second Examiner.

FIRST EXAMINER. Robert Johnson?

JOHNSON. Yes.

SECOND EXAMINER (*glancing at his notes*). Born in Grantham Street, Longfield?

JOHNSON. Yes.

FIRST EXAMINER (*reading from his notes*). Elder son of Frederick Johnson, solicitor's clerk, who for more than ten years sacrificed a number of personal comforts and pleasures in order to give you a good education?

JOHNSON (*staggered*). Yes, I suppose he did. He—was a good father.

SECOND EXAMINER. Did you ever thank him for those sacrifices?

JOHNSON (*rather shamefaced*). No. And I ought to have done.

SECOND EXAMINER (*referring to his notes*). Your mother, Edith Johnson, I see, died of peritonitis at

a comparatively early age. She was warned that an operation was necessary but refused to have one in time because she was afraid of the expense and the trouble it would cause her husband and children. You knew that, of course?

JOHNSON (*deeply troubled*). No—I didn't. I—I—sometimes wondered—that's all.

FIRST EXAMINER (*glancing at his note-book, relentlessly*). And yet you have referred to yourself at times, I see, as a good son.

JOHNSON (*thoroughly uncomfortable*). I only meant—well—we all seemed to get on together, y'know—not like some families. They were very decent to me. I've always admitted that. (*Hesitantly*.) As a matter of fact, I've been thinking about all that . . . just lately. . . . I remember, just after I was taken ill——

SECOND EXAMINER (*briskly*). Yes now—you were taken ill.

JOHNSON (*brightening up, for we are all proud of our illnesses*). Yes. Quite suddenly. A most extraordinary thing—but——

FIRST EXAMINER (*cutting in, ruthlessly*). You have occupied a responsible position for some time?

JOHNSON (*bewildered and rather sulky*). Yes, I suppose so.

SECOND EXAMINER (*severely*). You are a husband—and a father?

JOHNSON. Yes.

FIRST EXAMINER (*severely*). What care have you taken of your health?

JOHNSON (*apologetically*). Well—I've always tried——

FIRST EXAMINER (*ignoring him*). The heart, the lungs, the liver and kidneys, the digestive system, the intestinal tract.

SECOND EXAMINER. The abdominal wall must be firm—no sagging.

FIRST EXAMINER (*who now sits on the desk, facing JOHNSON*). The teeth need the greatest care. Particles of decaying food lodged in dental cavities may produce a septic condition.

SECOND EXAMINER (*also sitting*). Eye-strain is common among sedentary workers. How often have you given yourself a boracic eyebath or had your sight examined?

FIRST EXAMINER. Alcohol and rich starchy foods must be avoided. Have you avoided them?

SECOND EXAMINER. Smoking leads to nicotine poisoning and may easily ruin the digestion.

FIRST EXAMINER. Everywhere you go, you risk infection.

SECOND EXAMINER. But the common cold, the beginning of many serious ailments, may be traced to a lack of fresh air.

FIRST EXAMINER. Few of us take the trouble to walk properly.

SECOND EXAMINER. Or to sit properly. You should always sit upright, not allowing the spine to be curved. Learn to sit properly.

*(The wretched JOHNSON, who has been slumped deep into his chair, now sharply raises himself to a more erect position, but it does not help him.)*

FIRST EXAMINER. But take care to relax. The nervous strain of modern life demands constant and complete relaxation. Loosen those tense muscles.

JOHNSON *(slumping again, but determined to protest at last)*. Now—look here—just a minute——!

SECOND EXAMINER *(very severely, rising)*. Please—we have no time to waste.

*(The two monsters make rapid and contemptuous notes in their books, while JOHNSON regards them helplessly.)*

FIRST EXAMINER. You owe it yourself, to your wife and family, to your employer and fellow workers, to your country, to take sufficient exercise.

JOHNSON *(who mistakenly feels on safer ground here)*. I've always enjoyed taking exercise. Tennis and golf——

SECOND EXAMINER *(very severely)*. Too many middle-aged men, sedentary workers, imagine they can improve their physical condition by rushing into games at the week-end, and only succeed in straining their hearts.

JOHNSON *(desperately)*. I've tried not to overdo it,

and every morning, if I wasn't too late, I did a few exercises in my bedroom——

FIRST EXAMINER (*very severely*). Nearly all systems of home exercises, devised by professional strong men without expert physiological knowledge, are liable to do more harm than good.

SECOND EXAMINER. Consult your doctor first. *He* knows.

FIRST EXAMINER. But the habit of flying to the doctor on every trivial occasion is dangerous and must be avoided.

JOHNSON (*sinking fast now*). Look here, gentlemen, I can say is—I've tried to do my best.

SECOND EXAMINER (*going right up to him, in smoothly tone*). Possibly. But is your best good enough?

FIRST EXAMINER (*with the same horrible technique*). After all, what do you *know*?

SECOND EXAMINER (*severe again now*). How far have you tried to acquaint yourself with the findings of chemistry, physics, biology, geology, astronomy, mathematics?

FIRST EXAMINER. Ask yourself what you know about the Mendelian Law, the Quantum Theory, Spectral Analysis, or the behaviour of Electrons and neutrons.

SECOND EXAMINER. Could you explain Freud's theory of the Id, Marx's Surplus Value, Neo-Realism, Representational Art, Polyphonic Music?

FIRST EXAMINER. Or—give an exact account of the sequence of events leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914?

SECOND EXAMINER (*with dangerous easiness*). You were taught French at school?

JOHNSON. Yes.

SECOND EXAMINER (*turning like a tiger*). Have you ever brushed up your French?

JOHNSON (*desperately*). No, but I've always been meaning to. Hang it!—a man can't do everything——

FIRST EXAMINER (*calmly and maddeningly*). A post-man in South-East London taught himself to speak eight foreign languages fluently in his spare time.

SECOND EXAMINER (*in the same tone*). A cinema operator in Pasadena, California, recently received an honours degree in natural sciences.

JOHNSON (*wearily, almost brokenly*). I know, I know. And good luck to them. But as I told you——

FIRST EXAMINER (*very severely*). Kindly tell us what we ask you to tell us. We have no time now for general conversation. You have two children?

JOHNSON (*brightening up, for this may let him out*). Yes. A boy and a girl.

SECOND EXAMINER. You are fond of them?

JOHNSON (*indignantly*). Of course I am.

FIRST EXAMINER. What serious thought have you ever given to their education, to their mental development, to their emotional and spiritual life?



SECOND EXAMINER. Have you ever brushed up your French?

JOHNSON. No, but I've always been meaning to. Hang it!—a man can't do everything——

FIRST EXAMINER. A postman in South-East London taught himself to speak eight foreign languages fluently in his spare time.





SECOND EXAMINER. They are the citizens of the future, the inheritors of a great empire——

JOHNSON. I know, I know. I've often thought of that.

SECOND EXAMINER (*pressing him*). Really thought about it, or merely, after an unnecessarily heavy meal accompanied by alcohol, congratulated yourself that these children were an extension of your own ego?

FIRST EXAMINER. You have helped to bring them into the world, but what kind of world have you brought them into?

JOHNSON (*hastily, hoping he is now on firmer ground*). Oh—well—I've no illusions about that——

SECOND EXAMINER (*angrily*). We are not asking you about your illusions. For many years now you have had a vote?

JOHNSON (*still hoping*). Yes, and I've always used it——not like some chaps——

FIRST EXAMINER. But how much of your time and serious attention have been given to the problems that must be studied by a wise member of the electorate?

SECOND EXAMINER. For example, the Gold Standard as against an artificial currency based on the balance of trade. The relation between nationalism and Tariffs. The fallacy of colonial exploitation.

FIRST EXAMINER. What account of any value could you give of the political significance of minorities in Central Europe, the importance of the Ukraine in

European affairs, the success or failure of Stalin's second Five Year Plan?

SECOND EXAMINER. Could you define accurately Fascism?

FIRST EXAMINER. National Socialism?

SECOND EXAMINER. Russian Communism?

JOHNSON (*a rebel at last, jumping up*). No. Could you? (*As they do not reply, but make notes.*) I might as well tell you, I've had enough of this. Who are you, anyhow? (*As they do not reply, but look at each other significantly.*) I don't even know why I'm here. Loss of memory—or something. No reason why I should stay.

FIRST EXAMINER (*ignoring this outburst*). Your form, please.

(*He takes the form, hastily makes some marks on it, then hands it back.*)

JOHNSON (*angrily*). I don't want the thing.

(*JOHNSON throws the form on the table and sits sulking. The two EXAMINERS look at the form, then at him, give a nod to each other, and go off through one of the big office doors.*)

JOHNSON. I'm not staying, y'know. Why should I? I didn't want to come here. Keep your money.

(*But the EXAMINERS have gone. JOHNSON sits slumped in his chair behind the desk, a sulky rebel. And now the hard white lights go down, and a mysterious and rather ghostly light hovers over a small door that is not really in the office at all but*

*much nearer to us, in fact in the false proscenium. There is one of these doors at each side of the false proscenium. Through this one, then, in the queer light, enter the CLERK we have seen before and a miserable woman very poorly dressed. For a moment we do not recognise her as JILL JOHNSON.)*

CLERK (*indicating* JOHNSON). Is that the man?

JILL (*who talks now in an angry whine*). Yes, that's my husband.

JOHNSON (*astonished*). Why—Jill!

JILL (*ignoring him*). Yes, that's him. And look at him—doing nothing! And look at us—his wife and children—turned out of house and home—not a bite to eat all day. And why? Because my husband isn't man enough to do a decent day's work.

JOHNSON (*protesting*). But—Jill—I—

JILL (*shrilly, a virago now*). Don't Jill me, Robert Johnson. I wish to God I'd never set eyes on you—and with those poor children of mine—had never—never—been born.

*(She is crying now, and as her voice dies away so she too seems to melt away. But the CLERK remains, to stare accusingly.)*

CLERK (*in a large maddening tone*). So that's the kind of man you are, is it, Johnson?

JOHNSON (*half bewildered, half angry*). No, it isn't. I'm not like that at all. (*He goes down.*) Here—Jill——  
(*But JILL disappeared several moments before and*

*now the CLERK has gone and the light has changed. JOHNSON returns slowly and miserably to his seat behind the desk.)*

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. All application forms to be completed within the next fifteen minutes. Only fifteen minutes more.

*(But before JOHNSON can apply himself properly to the task of filling in the form, the irritating ballet of clerks and secretaries is back again, biding JOHNSON from us and throwing gigantic shadows on the back wall. When they have gone and the hard white light is blazing away again, we discover that standing over JOHNSON is the schoolmaster he always disliked the most, the very same man wearing his chalky M.A. gown and mortar-board, and as of course he has come out of the past nearly forty years ago, he has a rather old-fashioned look. As soon as JOHNSON looks up, startled, to see this hateful figure, he becomes a sulky schoolboy again.)*

SCHOOLMASTER *(one of those sarcastic fellows)*. You'll not be terribly surprised to learn, Johnson, that I'm not pleased with you.

JOHNSON *(raising a schoolboy hand)*. Honestly—sir—it's not my fault. You see——

SCHOOLMASTER. No excuses, please, Johnson. I hear too many, and I've been hearing them for thirty-five years, and yours are among the worst I've ever heard. Now—if it isn't boring you, Johnson, for I

know how easily bored you become—might I ask, as a special favour, if you remember a certain wise saw I am in the habit of repeating?

JOHNSON (*who loathes the thing*). Attention to work is the secret of progress.

SCHOOLMASTER. Right. Attention to work is the secret of progress. But your trouble, Johnson, is that you don't attend to work. You don't seem to attend to anything very much, these days, do you? Mr. Morrison tells me he's dropping you out of the House Eleven because you won't attend even there. No doubt you're busy on the playing field thinking about the work you ought to have done for me.

JOHNSON (*who feels there is something in this*). Well, sir, honestly it is a *bit* like that——

SCHOOLMASTER. I said no excuses, Johnson. And now, just to make sure you *do* attend to something for once, you'll spend the rest of this afternoon writing me an essay on the causes of the Thirty Years War.

JOHNSON. Oh—but—sir——!

SCHOOLMASTER (*firmly*). The causes of the Thirty Years War, thank you, Johnson.

(*He sweeps out majestically.* JOHNSON, *still the schoolboy, looks in that direction and makes a rude face and a rude noise. We can just hear him muttering to himself: "Old pig! Thirty Years War—oh—golly! Causes of the Thirty Years War." But then he stares at the table in front of him, he is first*

*puzzled and then relieved, suddenly remembering that he is not a schoolboy any longer. No, he certainly isn't a schoolboy, but how far does that take him? What is he now? We can see him asking himself these questions, still bewildered.)*

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. All applicants with forms still not completed must hurry now. Only a few minutes left.

*(As JOHNSON tries to settle down with his form again, two typical newspaper "boys" come hurrying on, one at each side of the desk, and begin calling out in their usual style.)*

FIRST NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the big dee-saster.

SECOND NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the 'orrible mur-der.

FIRST NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the Cri-sis.

SECOND NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the fall o' Peking, Barcelona, Madrid.

FIRST NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the end o' Rome, Vienna, Berlin, Paris.

SECOND NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the burning o' London.

FIRST NEWSPAPER BOY. All abou' the Great Plague.

SECOND NEWSPAPER BOY. All about the end o' the world.

*(Up to the last two or three cries, JOHNSON has resisted them, but now he comes forward, putting a hand in his pocket for coppers, feeling very anxious.)*

JOHNSON. Here, what's all this?

FIRST NEWSPAPER BOY (*coolly*). All the winners.

SECOND NEWSPAPER BOY (*hopefully*). Duke stung by wasp.

JOHNSON (*annoyed*). Go on. Clear out.

*(They hurry out. JOHNSON returns to the desk and starts on the form again, but the music begins and a solitary clerk-dancer appears and performs his antics just in front of where JOHNSON is sitting. JOHNSON rises angrily.)*

JOHNSON (*shouting*). Oh—for God's sake—stop that. Get out—and stay out.

*(He takes a few menacing steps towards the clerk, who hurries out, through one of the office doors. The light changes, the desk no longer being brilliantly illuminated, and, in a more normal light, MR. CLAYTON strides in through one of the small proscenium doors. He is at least twenty-five years younger than he was when we saw him in the hall of JOHNSON'S house, and of course he is dressed like a prosperous City man of the pre-War period. He is extremely angry.)*

CLAYTON (*shouting*). Johnson!

JOHNSON (*turning round, surprised*). Why—Mr. Clayton——!

CLAYTON (*angrily*). You young idiot, you were distinctly told to send out all those invoices dated the 30th.

JOHNSON (*now a dismayed junior clerk again*). No—I wasn't, sir.

CLAYTON. You were. I told you myself, a week ago. Every invoice to be dated the 30th. We shall have to send every customer an apology, and you can begin writing them now and stay until they're done. If you'd think a little more about your work and less about the Alhambra and the Oval, we wouldn't have these idiotic mistakes. And if this occurs again, Johnson, you'd better go and amuse yourself in some other office.

JOHNSON (*very apologetically*). Honestly, Mr. Clayton, it wasn't my fault.

CLAYTON (*as he bangs out*). Rubbish!

(*As JOHNSON stands near the door through which CLAYTON has just gone, and as he stares at it, puzzled and depressed, through the other small door MRS. GREGG enters quickly and quietly and sits down on the settee in front of the desk. She is now about forty-five, and dressed in the fashion of twenty-five years ago. She is doing some sewing.*)

MRS. GREGG (*quietly, but firmly*). You'd better come here, Robert, and talk to me.

JOHNSON (*turning, surprised*). Why, Mrs. Gregg! (*He goes nearer, nervously.*) Did—er—Jill—tell you?

MRS. GREGG. She did. And I do think it would have been much better if you had spoken to me first yourself, Robert. You must remember I am in a very



difficult position, for I have to be both father and mother to poor Jill now.

JOHNSON (*sitting by her, awkwardly*). Well, I'm sorry, Mrs. Gregg. I didn't know quite what to do——

MRS. GREGG. Of course Jill thinks it's all very wonderful, but the poor child's very young and has had no experience.

JOHNSON (*eagerly, the young lover*). I'll make her happy, I know I will.

MRS. GREGG (*primly*). We've never been wealthy, of course, but before my husband's death we were reasonably well-off, and I think you ought to understand that Jill has been used to a great deal more than you can possibly offer her for a long time. I've no personal objection to you, Robert, though frankly I had hoped that Jill would do much better for herself. What can *you* offer her?

JOHNSON (*unhappily, for what can he offer her?*). Well—I know I'm no great catch——

MRS. GREGG (*closing her eyes, primly*). There's no need to be vulgar, Robert.

JOHNSON. Sorry. But—really—— I don't think my prospects are too bad.

MRS. GREGG (*putting her sewing together*). If you'll come to tea on Sunday, Jill's uncle, my brother, will be there—he's a solicitor and understands business—and then perhaps you wouldn't mind answering a few questions and telling him exactly what

you think your prospects are. Four on Sunday, then, Robert.

*(And out she goes, leaving JOHNSON staring after her miserably, for apparently he knows this unc.e, and we hear him muttering: "Lord!—he'll never understand—that hard old devil. Make me look like tuppence. Nice Sunday we're going to have. Prospects!" He sits down, still the young lover, perhaps to make a few notes on his prospects, then he sees the form in front of him, slowly recognises it, and the twenty-five years that have elapsed since he had that little talk with Mrs. Gregg vanish again in a flash.)*

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. All applicants must now complete their forms by answering the question they are considering.

JOHNSON *(reading from his form)*. If you had lent your brother ten pounds when you were twenty, and you now compelled him to return the loan with compound interest at fifteen per cent, what would he pay you? *(After a pause.)* That oughtn't to be hard. *(Pauses again.)* But why should I work it out? I wouldn't charge my brother compound interest or any other interest. Why ask such a question? And how did they know I had a brother? Perhaps they mean any brother. They say in church we're all brothers. That's awkward.

*(And now he hears—and we hear too—some music*

*of a kind we have not heard here yet but will hear later when we come to the Inn. JOHNSON listens to it, then speaks slowly, as if an inner and deeper self is talking.)*

JOHNSON. That music doesn't belong to this place. But then neither do I. Who does? I've lived in the world where that music was, but not for long—no, never for long. Not my fault. It comes and goes so quickly, just gleams and fades, that other world, like the light at sunset on distant hills. . . .

*(The music goes on, high and trailing, but now a girl's voice sings with it, high and trailing too. He listens a moment before speaking.)*

JOHNSON. But perhaps that is real—that, somewhere outside—and this only a dream. I've had dreams like this—with everything at first solid as rock—though they tell us now rocks aren't solid, only shifting shapes—but afterwards it all melted away, all the stone walls and iron bars. . . . *(This reminds him of something as he repeats it).* . . . Stone walls—iron bars. . . .

*(He looks up to see approaching a pale wretched young man in convict's dress and behind him a stalwart policeman. The two of them move slowly down and halt in front of JOHNSON, who starts up and comes round as he recognises the convict.)*

JOHNSON. Why—Charlie—yes, it is!

CONVICT *(in dead tone)*. Yes, Johnson, it's me all right.

JOHNSON (*amazed and distressed*). But—they said—you'd died there—in prison.

CONVICT. If you ask me, I died that afternoon in the dock, *you* remember. Yes, that's when I really died.

JOHNSON. Charlie, I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry I've been, how often I've thought about it all.

CONVICT (*with a miserable sneer*). *Thought* about it!

JOHNSON (*distressed*). But what could we do, Charlie, what could we do? They dragged the evidence out of us. We didn't want to make it hard for you, Charlie. And afterwards we tried to do what we could.

CONVICT. What could you do?

JOHNSON. There wasn't much, I know. They wouldn't let us send you anything, but some of us clubbed together to give the girl something.

CONVICT (*loudly and angrily*). Give the girl something! All she wanted was me, and where did you put me?

POLICEMAN (*roughly*). Go on, you, and not so much talk.

(*The CONVICT, without another look at JOHNSON, continues on his way across, while the POLICEMAN, after following him a few paces, suddenly stops and turns, to address JOHNSON.*)

POLICEMAN (*heavily*). And listen, mister, *you* be careful.

JOHNSON (*stammering*). What—what—do you mean?

POLICEMAN (*severely*). I mean, be careful, that's all. Don't think we haven't had our eye on *you*.

JOHNSON (*protesting, though at once feeling guilty*). But—I've never done anything.

POLICEMAN (*aggressively*). Oh! Well, let's see. (*Produces notebook, and adopts manner of police witness.*) Did or did you not—on the first of the fifth—nineteen-hundred-and-six—take two shillings' worth of stamps out of the stamp book at your office?

JOHNSON (*staggered*). Well—yes, I did.

POLICEMAN (*significantly*). Ah!

JOHNSON (*hurriedly protesting*). But I was only a youngster—gave way to sudden temptation—I was hard up and wanted to buy something in a hurry—and I put two shillings in stamps back the next day—I——

POLICEMAN (*same manner as before*). Did you or did you not—on several occasions—make tax returns you knew at the time were false——?

JOHNSON (*trying to cut in*). I only——

POLICEMAN (*checking him*). Did you or did you not—in connection with a large order from Singapore, when a higher price was quoted by mistake—and you was on the point of cabling your customer the proper price—accept this large order at the higher price and cancel the cable?

JOHNSON. Well, I was doing it for the firm.

POLICEMAN. Did you or did you not—on the third of the eleventh, nineteen-thirty-one—deliberately

hide one of the firm's books—to keep it from the accountants for a day or two——

JOHNSON (*desperately*). We were in a temporary difficulty—and I——

POLICEMAN (*interrupting, severely*). Tell me you've never done anything! Get yourself into *serious* trouble one of these days. Don't think we haven't got our eye on you. Be careful, that's all. Just be careful.

(*He gives poor JOHNSON a final severe look, then goes out. JOHNSON sinks down on to the settee in front of the desk, and looks down at the form he is still holding.*)

JOHNSON (*reading*). Just before the outbreak of war, you have bought up all the available stocks of iodine. You can either let the wholesalers have some at an increased price, or go to the department of medical supplies and name your own price. Which would be wiser? (*He looks at it horrified.*) Wiser?

(*The lights change, and the clerks and secretaries flicker about, while JOHNSON remains motionless, silent and depressed. When they have gone, and the bright lights are back again, we see that the TWO EXAMINERS are standing one at each side of him.*)

FIRST EXAMINER (*announcing himself*). First Examiner.

SECOND EXAMINER (*announcing himself*). Second Examiner.

FIRST EXAMINER. Your form, please.

SECOND EXAMINER (*looking at it*). Miserable!

FIRST EXAMINER. Contemptible!

SECOND EXAMINER. He's hardly tried.

FIRST EXAMINER (*screwing up the form*). We couldn't possibly accept this.

SECOND EXAMINER. No money for you this time.

(BOTH EXAMINERS *move away, then turn.*)

FIRST EXAMINER. You'll have to try again to-morrow. Keep on trying.

SECOND EXAMINER. Try, try and try again.

JOHNSON (*sullenly*). I'm not going to try again, and I'm not coming here to-morrow.

FIRST EXAMINER (*cackling*). No, you're not *coming* here to-morrow because you'll still *be* here to-morrow.

JOHNSON (*defiantly*). I won't.

SECOND EXAMINER (*cackling*). But you forget that without money you can't get out of here. . . .

FIRST EXAMINER. You needn't pay any money to get out, but you must have money.

SECOND EXAMINER. And you haven't any. You wouldn't be here if you had.

(JOHNSON *is slumped in despair on the settee. The Two EXAMINERS move together nearer the door, then turn again, and now in their tones are horrible echoes of the schoolmaster and Clayton and Mrs. Gregg.*)

FIRST EXAMINER. Try again to-morrow, Johnson. Keep on trying.

SECOND EXAMINER. Remember, Johnson, attention to work is the secret of progress.

FIRST EXAMINER. Think more about your work, Johnson.

SECOND EXAMINER. Ask yourself exactly what your prospects are.

FIRST EXAMINER (*in a nasty little squeak, to the music*). Good day.

SECOND EXAMINER (*in the same manner*). Good day.

*(Out they go together, and now the brilliant lights begin to fade. JOHNSON is still slumped on the settee. The very brisk strident music heard before is now a sort of broken dragging march in a minor key. The lights go down further.)*

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. Everything for the incinerators. Everything for the incinerators.

*(The clerks come on, carrying baskets filled with paper, spilling some of the paper as they move slowly towards the back, where a curtain lifts showing a gleaming red opening. A tall figure is standing there, with his back to us, dressed in workman's clothes, and his job appears to be to feed the furnace with the baskets of paper. We can see him easily above the great desk because he is standing on a little platform, at one side of which there is a flight of steps leading we do not know*



*where. As the clerks go off, rather like pieces of clockwork running down, JOHNSON rises, as the music ends, and picks up one or two of the nearest bits of paper.)*

JOHNSON (*excitedly*). Why—this is money. What are you going to do with it?

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER (*coolly*). Burn it. Everything has to go to the incinerators at the end of the day.

JOHNSON. Yes—but—money too?

VOICE FROM LOUD-SPEAKER. Yes, money too. All the same.

JOHNSON (*with mounting excitement*). But—I want some money.

*(He is looking up towards the loud-speakers, but as no reply comes from them, now he goes nearer the FIGURE, who still has his back turned to us, feeding the furnace. JOHNSON now addresses the FIGURE.)*

JOHNSON. I say—look here—silly to burn all that money, when I want some.

THE FIGURE (*not turning*). How much?

JOHNSON (*very excited now*). How much? Well, much as I can get, I suppose. And it looks to me as if these are bank notes—and big ones, some of 'em.

THE FIGURE. Yes.

JOHNSON. Well, now—couldn't I have a few? Say, a handful? A pocketful? Two pockets full? *All* my pockets full? Could I?

THE FIGURE (*in deep mocking tone*). Come and get it. (*As he says this, the FIGURE turns round, holding out money, but revealing himself, to the sound of harsh menacing brassy chords from the orchestra, wearing a terrifying death's head. He stands in a queer deathly light, on the steps, a foot or two above JOHNSON, who has now mounted the platform. We can see nothing now but these two, and the red gleam of the furnace.*)

THE FIGURE (*as JOHNSON does not move, mockingly*). Well, come and get it. Frightened?

JOHNSON (*as he shrinks back*). Yes.

THE FIGURE. Why?

JOHNSON (*slowly, unhappily*). I always have been. It's been behind everything, waiting—that fear. The dark grave, corruption, and the worm. I remember, when I was a child, seeing the half-rotten carcase of a cat, white and crawling with maggots. Then once, the swollen purple face of a drowned man. Then later, my mother, smiling but turned into wax; a sickly sweet smell all over the house; the heavy tread of the coffin bearers; the thudding of the clay on the coffin lid. I went to the War and I remember the vacant eye-sockets of my dead friends. There was a hand I have tried to forget. It was sticking out of a parapet, a mute and rigid cry for help, as if the rest of him had been turned into earth and sandbags, and he knew—he still knew—and held out a hand towards



JOHNSON. And it looks to me as if these are bank notes—and big ones, some of 'em.

FIGURE. Yes.

JOHNSON. Well, now--couldn't I have a few? Say a handful? A pocketful? Two pockets full? All my pockets full? Could I?

FIGURE. Come and get it.



the warm living flesh, before the worms were at us too—oh God!—

THE FIGURE (*calmly*). The worms are God's, too. Why shouldn't they have their chance?

JOHNSON (*bitterly*). Theirs is a better chance. They do not know what is waiting for them—we do.

THE FIGURE. You have been afraid so long, there cannot be anything left to fear. Come. (*He holds out the money.*)

JOHNSON (*shuddering*). No.

THE FIGURE (*sharply*). Come and look closer, you fool. Come.

(*Now, very slowly, as if drawn against his will, JOHNSON moves closer, and then within a pace or two, stops and stares.*)

JOHNSON. Why—it's a mask, a painted mask.

(*He goes a little nearer to make sure, while the FIGURE stands upright, still waiting, a whole sack of money in front of him.*)

THE FIGURE. Take it off.

JOHNSON (*fearfully*). No. There might be worse behind it. Death's real face—not even the clean bone—a crawling corruption——

THE FIGURE. You will be here for ever if you don't.

(*JOHNSON hesitates, then, making up his mind, he suddenly steps forward, as the music makes a queer high tremulo, and plucks off the mask, revealing*

*behind it the face of a calm, wise-looking person, at whom JOHNSON stares in bewilderment.)*

THE FIGURE (*apparently amused*). Well?

JOHNSON (*slowly*). You are like—and yet not quite like—so many people I have known. It's as if they all looked at me together. My father . . . our old family doctor, MacFarlane . . . and my first school-master . . . even our old nurse . . . and a parson I once talked to, just one night, crossing to France . . . and . . . and . . .

*(He cannot at the moment think of any more, but he knows and we know there are probably hundreds more.)*

THE FIGURE (*calmly*). Do you still want your money?

JOHNSON (*eagerly and with an unpleasant swagger*). Yes, of course I do. Lucky I had the guts to take off that foul mask, wasn't it? But I'm not bad when it comes to a real push. Put me really up against it, and I don't disgrace myself. Yes, let's have some money, and get out of this. (*As he fills his pockets with notes.*) Fivers, tenners, and I saw a hundred-pound note. This is something to be going on with, eh? I can do something with this packet. And nobody can say I haven't earned it, can they?

*(While he is stuffing the last of the notes into his pockets, what seemed before the small opening down to a furnace is now revealed as a decorated and*

*brightly-illuminated corridor, and along this corridor comes the sound of a dance band.)*

JOHNSON. Listen! What's that music? Sounds good to me.

THE FIGURE. Oh—that! It's the night club—the *Jungle Hot Spot*. Bright lights. Hot Jazz. Dinners, suppers, drinks, beautiful girls.

JOHNSON. They'll take this money there, eh?

THE FIGURE. They'll be delighted to take it.

JOHNSON. That's the place for me then. Let's have some fun while we're alive, I say; we're a long time dead. What do you say?

THE FIGURE (*rather sadly*). I say what I've always said, Robert, that there isn't much harm in you, but nevertheless you're rather a fool.

JOHNSON (*angrily*). Oh yes, that's just what you *would* say. Just when I look like having some fun for once, you'd like to butt in and spoil everything. Well, you're not going to this time. I'm going to see what's going on in this hot spot of yours.

*(The entrance to the night club is now brighter than ever and the dance music is growing louder.*

*JOHNSON is now shouting with excitement.)*

JOHNSON. That's the stuff, boys. Come on, snap into it. Keep it going, and make it hot. We'll have a big night. I'm coming.

*(He waves a hand and down he goes, out of sight, and the dance music is louder than ever and the curtain is falling)*

## ACT TWO

We are looking again at the hall of JOHNSON'S house, but now it is the afternoon of the day following the funeral, and the place does not look quite so dreary as it did before. AGNES is arranging some flowers on the small table, and now FREDa, wearing an overall and still looking rather peaked, comes out of the drawing-room, carrying some wilted large lilies.

FREDa. Agnes, take these and throw them out.

AGNES (*as she takes the lilies.*) Yes, miss. Though they're not done yet, not by a long way. If you was to cut their stalks——

FREDa. No, I hate them. Big sickly lilies. I think it was the sight of them yesterday that started me off.

AGNES. I thought you got through it very well, Miss Freda.

FREDa. No, I didn't, Agnes. I was stupid.

(RICHARD, *wearing an overcoat, comes in, and stops at the hall-stand to leave his hat and overcoat there.*

AGNES *goes out with the lilies.* FREDa, *who has taken over the job of arranging the flowers, stops and*



*turns when she hears her brother coming in. We can have a good look at them now, and see that they make a pleasant pair of youngsters.)*

FREDA. Oh—Richard—what was it like?

RICHARD. A bit mouldy. Then old Clayton came in, and told me to pop off. He's coming here to-morrow—he and Uncle George, to settle things. How's Mother?

FREDA (*not very happily*). Just the same. Very, very quiet—and sort of strange——

RICHARD (*uneasily*). It would be better—wouldn't it—if she was making a fuss—you know, crying——?

FREDA. Much. This other thing's a bit—frightening.

RICHARD. I know. Where is she?

FREDA. Upstairs. She said she'd lie down. (*She pauses.*) Do you think—he knows?

RICHARD. Who?

FREDA. Daddy, of course.

RICHARD. Knows what?

FREDA (*very earnestly*). Knows that all this has been going on—all that awful fuss yesterday and then this strange quietness to-day?

RICHARD. No, of course not. When you're dead, you're dead.

FREDA. Yes, but you might know what was going on?

RICHARD. Don't be a chump. How *could* you?

FREDA. I don't know, but I feel somehow you might.

RICHARD. Why, he didn't know anything that last two days. Just muttered a bit, that's all. In a sort of dream, really.

FREDA (*who has been thinking about this*). Well, supposing the dreaming goes on. Then you wouldn't even know you'd died, would you? And then it wouldn't be so bad for him as it is for us—would it? I mean, because he could be dreaming about still being with us, and wouldn't really know the difference.

RICHARD (*thoughtfully*). He would. You always do in dreams. There's something queer about them. You always know. (*Pauses.*) All to-day I've been thinking about him. Couldn't stop, somehow. Y'know, Freda, I was a bit rotten to him sometimes. Didn't mean to be. It was all right when I was a kid—we had some grand times—but just lately he began to think I was getting too cheeky and I thought he interfered too much, as if I was still a kid—you know how it was.

FREDA. Yes.

RICHARD (*slowly*). I thought I'd tell him it was all right and I was sorry and all that, but it was too late then—he couldn't understand what anybody was saying to him.

FREDA. Perhaps if you thought it, he got it

somehow. (*Pauses.*) You know, I used to think of him as being quite old.

RICHARD. Lord yes! So did I. Terribly old.

FREDA. I know. Well, just lately I've suddenly seen he isn't really old—I mean—— (*She is distressed.*) —he wasn't.

*(Her mother, JILL, now comes in slowly, a pale-faced figure in black, looking almost as if she were walking in her sleep.)*

FREDA (*turning, reproachfully*). Oh—mother—you said you were going to rest.

JILL (*apologetically*). I know, darling.

FREDA. Agnes and I can do everything. There isn't much more to do.

RICHARD. And I'll help. Come on, mother, let me take you back to your room. Then try and sleep.

JILL (*with suppressed agitation*). No, darling. I did try. I was—half asleep. Then I had a hateful sort of dream. Frightening, horrible. I suppose it was really a nightmare. I dreamt I was trying to find your father. I knew I had to find him. And I had to look in the strangest places—all vague—but—frightening——

*(By the time she has said the last word the light, which has been fading rapidly, has almost gone, and the next moment we are in darkness. . . .*

*. . . At first we do not see all the night club but only the bar, a small cocktail bar, gaudily decorated, glittering, and lit with strange crimson and purple*

*lights.* JOHNSON, *now in full evening dress, is perched on a stool, swallowing cocktails and talking to the barman, a smooth, white-coated, rather sinister fellow. JOHNSON is already beginning to feel the effect of the cocktails.*)

JOHNSON. What do you call this? (*Holds up brightly-coloured cocktail.*)

BARMAN. Hell Diver, sir.

JOHNSON. Hell Diver, eh?

BARMAN. One of my specialities.

JOHNSON (*after gulping it down*). I like it better than the blue one. What do you call the blue one?

BARMAN. Mermaid's Kiss.

JOHNSON. Pretty good. But this Hell Diver is better. Touches the spot, eh? Let me have another. (*As BARMAN begins mixing another.*) Now, where have those nice fellows gone? I hope they didn't pay you for those drinks.

BARMAN (*smoothly*). No, sir, they said you were paying.

JOHNSON (*with careless grandeur*). Quite right, quite right. What's the name of that smart, clever-looking one, who said he could put me on to something?

BARMAN. Probably Mr. Scorpion, sir. One of our regular customers here, sir. Here every night, nearly.

JOHNSON (*drinking*). Quite right. I shall come here every night. And what was the little gentleman's name—that legal man in the City?

BARMAN. Mr. Rat, sir. Comes here a lot with Mr. Slug. You were talking to Mr. Slug.

JOHNSON (*with fussy importance*). Yes, yes. Had very interesting talk with Mr. Slug. Nice crowd. (*As BARMAN hands him a bright yellow drink.*) What's this one?

BARMAN. Dragon's Breath.

JOHNSON. Always wanted to try a Dragon's Breath. (*Gulps it, gasps, then tosses BARMAN a note.*) Keep the change.

BARMAN. There isn't any change, sir. With all the drinks together your bill comes to——

JOHNSON (*cutting in*). All right. Don't want any arithmetic to-night. (*Tosses him another note.*) Keep the change out of *that*.

BARMAN (*not impressed*). Thanks.

JOHNSON (*more to himself than to the BARMAN*). Man needs a little recreation. Relax. Can't be solemn and responsible all the time. Not good enough. Bad for a fellow, too, not to hit the bright lights and hot spots once in a while. Scorpion and Slug were quite right. Good enough for them, good enough for me.

(*Now JOHNSON leaves the bar and comes towards us, and we no longer see the bar but only JOHNSON'S face, strained with excitement in the sharp white light.*)

JOHNSON (*with mounting excitement*). There is a beast with shaggy hide and claws, and now he has roused

himself from his long sleep, and I feel his fiery breath. Now I begin to see with his eyes and hear with his ears, and the lights burn terribly and the sounds pulsate through my blood.

*(He turns, and immediately the floor of the night club comes into view and we hear the music of a rumba and see a number of well-dressed but rather unpleasant-looking people dancing. There are little tables and chairs round the dance floor, and at the back, under a large decoration made of glittering writhing tinsel leaves, is a small platform. The scene is lit with acid greens and violent purples. JOHNSON regards it with enthusiasm.)*

JOHNSON. Just the sort of place I wanted. Couldn't be better. Make a big night of it.

*(The dance has ended and now the bar is lit up again, and there enter from below SIR JAMES PORKER, a fat grunting elderly man, and two girls, who look exactly alike, chiefly because they are wearing masks like dolls' faces. JOHNSON stares at them curiously.)*

BARMAN. Good evening, Sir James.

PORKER *(grunting)*. Evening. Gimme three of the usual.

BARMAN. Three of the usual.

*(As PORKER and his two girls settle at the bar, the HEADWAITER, a plump smooth foreign fellow, with a queer face, comes down and bows.)*

HEADWAITER *(bowing)*. Good evening, Sir James.

A great pleasure, Sir James. Good evening, ladies.

PORKER. 'Evening, Toad. Got my table?

HEADWAITER. Certainly, Sir James. Any time you are ready. You would like to see the menu, Sir James?

PORKER (*who never experiments*). No. Gimme all the usual.

HEADWAITER (*bowing*). Certainly, Sir James—all the usual.

(PORKER and the GIRLS now have their drinks. The HEADWAITER notices the existence of JOHNSON, who has been hovering not far away, waiting to be noticed.)

HEADWAITER. Good evening, sir. You will be wanting a table?

JOHNSON (*vaguely, but grandly*). Oh—yes. Table—certainly.

HEADWAITER. For how many, please, sir?

JOHNSON. Oh—I dunno. Pick somebody up, I expect.

HEADWAITER. Of course, sir. Lots of charrr-ming ladies will be here soon.

(He tries to lead JOHNSON away, to a table, but JOHNSON resists this and brings him further down.)

JOHNSON (*whispering*). Does it matter not being in evening dress?

HEADWAITER (*surprised*). But, sir, you are quite all right.

(He indicates JOHNSON'S clothes. JOHNSON looks down and is obviously surprised by what he sees and clearly did not know he was in evening clothes.)

JOHNSON (*slowly, puzzled*). That's queer. I wasn't wearing these.

HEADWAITER. You must have changed in a great hurry, sir. Now I will give you a good table.

JOHNSON (*importantly*). One of your very best.

HEADWAITER. Certainly, sir, one of our very best.

JOHNSON (*vulgarily*). What I always say is—the best is good enough for me.

HEADWAITER (*a diplomat*). Oh—very well put, sir. I must remember that. Now, sir—— (*Leading him towards a table.*) —Some supper—a little wine, eh?—dancing—and a nice girl, eh, sir?

JOHNSON (*as he sits down*). That's the idea. Enjoy yourself while you can, I say.

HEADWAITER. Quite right, sir.

JOHNSON (*pleased with himself*). Eat, drink and be merry, eh?

HEADWAITER. Excellent, sir. And very well put, if I may say so.

JOHNSON. Let's live while we can, I say, because we're a long time dead.

HEADWAITER (*with faintly sinister inflection*). Exactly, sir. A long time dead. I must remember that too, sir.

JOHNSON (*going from bad to worse*). I have the



money—— (*And he shows a roll of notes.*) —And I've earned it—so I'll do what I like with it. And I can spend it—you'll see that. Give me a good time—and I'll see you're all right.

HEADWAITER. We will give you a very good time, sir.

(*Now he bends forward and indicates PORKER, who is sitting with his GIRLS at a table opposite, loaded with food.*)

HEADWAITER (*whispering*). You know that gentleman? Very rich, one of our best patrons, always here. Sir James Porker.

JOHNSON (*looking across*). He looks the right sort.

(*PORKER, seeing that JOHNSON is looking across at him with interest, now waves a hand and beckons JOHNSON to him. Flattered by this notice, JOHNSON goes across.*)

PORKER (*talking with his mouth full*). 'Evening. Seem to know your face.

JOHNSON (*pleased*). My name's Johnson. And you're Sir James Porker, I think.

PORKER. Right. Come here a lot. Know the girls? This is Dot. This is Maisie.

JOHNSON (*smiling idiotically*). How d'you do?

PORKER. In the City?

JOHNSON. Yes.

PORKER. Might put you on to a good thing one of these days. Still plenty of good things if you

know where to find 'em and get in on the ground floor.

JOHNSON (*impressed*). Thanks very much.

PORKER (*as dancing begins again*). Like to dance, Johnson?

JOHNSON. Yes. But I need a partner.

PORKER. Dot here'll dance with you.

(JOHNSON bows to DOT and begins dancing with her. He dances with enthusiasm but not with much skill, occasionally bumping into other couples. We hear what he is saying to his partner.)

JOHNSON. This is fine. . . . Hope you're enjoying it? . . . Long time since I danced with such a pretty girl. . . . Like dancing too, but a bit out of practice—busy man, y'know. . . . A man's as old as he feels, I always say. What do *you* think? . . . Like your hair—wonderful hair you've got. Expect a lot of fellows have told you that, but after all the opinion of a man of the world's worth having, eh?

(*When the dancing ends, he takes her back to*

PORKER's table and stands there a minute or two.)

PORKER (*patronisingly*). Enjoy your dance, Johnson?

JOHNSON. Oh yes—delightful!

PORKER. Dot's a good dancer. Sometimes take her round myself. Maisie here talks better.

JOHNSON (*glancing at her*). Oh—really!

PORKER. Yes. Says some pretty smart things sometimes. Makes yer laugh. But Dot knows the best stories—very juicy.



THE NIGHT CLUB  
*(A group of the striking masks designed by Elizabeth Heffenden)*



JOHNSON (*coarsely*). Oh—I like 'em juicy.

PORKER (*very suggestively*). And that isn't all they can do, not by a long chalk. Is it, girls? I'll say it isn't. Eh, Johnson?

(*He guffaws and JOHNSON guffaws with him, and then JOHNSON turns away and sees a stout middle-aged woman standing in the bar, which is now lit up again, beckoning to him. This woman is very elaborately dressed, but has a coarse leering quality. JOHNSON joins her in the bar. The rest of the night club is now in darkness.*)

STOUT WOMAN (*with a leer*). You don't remember me, do you?

JOHNSON (*who doesn't*). Er—let me see—now——

STOUT WOMAN. Weren't you once little Bobby Johnson, Grantham Street, Longfield?

JOHNSON (*surprised*). Why—yes——

STOUT WOMAN (*chuckling*). Knew it! And you don't remember me? When I was a kid. Lived next door but one. Lottie Spragg.

JOHNSON (*staring at her in wonder*). Of course! Lottie Spragg. Yes, of course.

STOUT WOMAN (*in obscene whisper*). Remember how all you boys used to take me behind the old mill?

JOHNSON. Oh—I don't think I did——

STOUT WOMAN (*in the same tone*). Go on, you was as bad as the rest of 'em. Naughty little devils! Do you remember——

*(As she leans forward to whisper, the lights go down in the bar, though JOHNSON and the woman can still be seen there, and now a single white ray picks out JILL who has just entered below, on the other side. She looks exactly as we saw her when she came into the hall to tell the children about her dream. The music is playing softly.)*

JILL (*urgently*). I'm looking for my husband, Robert Johnson.

*(Two dancers turn in the light that follows her, and she sees—and we see—that they are wearing horrible masks, which turn them into dreadful caricatures of the types who might be found in such a place. She shrinks away, then moves on.)*

JILL (*more urgently*). I'm looking for my husband, Robert Johnson.

*(As she goes forward, she sees more masked dancers, and then she stops near a group, consisting of the HEADWAITER and two or three ordinary waiters, and as she speaks again, they all turn together, and we see that they look more like animals than human beings.)*

JILL (*calling*). Robert! Robert! Robert!

*(We catch a last glimpse of her surrounded by horrible masked figures, gibbering and tittering. Now JOHNSON stops the STOUT WOMAN a moment and looks up, as if hearing something.)*

JOHNSON (*calling, in hard voice*). He's not here. Go away. Go away.

*(The light that was on JILL has now faded out, but in the darkness we still hear a faint and dying "Robert! Robert!" Then the bar is bright again and JOHNSON and the STOUT WOMAN are laughing together.)*

STOUT WOMAN (*chuckling and nudging him*). Saucy devil! You're just as bad as ever. So am I.

JOHNSON. Ah—but we know a bit more now.

STOUT WOMAN (*still chuckling*). Well, we started as we meant to go on, didn't we? (*Moving.*) I must get back to the boys. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. Happy days!

JOHNSON (*as he takes her down*). Happy nights, you mean. So long!

*(When she has gone and he turns to the bar again, he finds installed there on a stool the young man CHARLIE, whom we saw in the office as a convict. But now apparently CHARLIE did not get found out, for he is very spruce indeed in full evening dress and with a carnation as a buttonhole, and he is obviously very much at home in this bar.)*

CHARLIE. Well, if it's not old stick-in-the-mud Johnson!

JOHNSON. Charlie? Yes, it is.

CHARLIE (*to BARMAN*). Two of my specials, George. These'll put hair on your chest, Johnson. Well, how's tricks?

JOHNSON (*sitting*). Fine, fine, absolutely fine. You're looking very prosperous, Charlie.

CHARLIE (*in the close, confidential bar-style of such men*). You bet I am. I had a nice little start with that fifteen hundred I pinched right from under old Clayton's nose. Neatest thing you ever saw. (*Chuckling*.)

JOHNSON (*chuckling*). Serve him right.

CHARLIE. Had a month in Monte with a bit I was running round with, then came home and ditched her—and went in with Finkelstein on some very pretty deals. If you're smart, I might let you into something—but—you've got to be smart, y'know.

JOHNSON (*boastfully*). Leave it to me, Charlie ol' boy. Why—only to-day—or yesterday—some time lately—I was somewhere—in an office—sort of office, anyhow—and things looked difficult—fact is, they were being made to look difficult—deliberately being made to look difficult—but I wouldn't stand for it. Oh, no, no. Cut it out, I said, cut it right out. I want my money and I don't leave here till I get it. Sort of man I am now.

CHARLIE. I can see you're getting smart. By the way, seem to be out of change—d'you mind lending me a fiver?

JOHNSON (*grandly*). Certainly not. (*Hands him notes*.) Better make it a tenner.

CHARLIE (*rising*). Thanks, old boy. Anything I can do for you here?







MADAME VULTURE. Now I know what you gentlemen are. You won't have this, and you will have that. No use my trying to suit you unless I know what it is you fancy. Big, medium, little. Brunette, red-head, blonde? Experienced or very young? White, I suppose?

JOHNSON (*whispering*). Yes. Get me a girl—a nice fresh little piece.

CHARLIE. That's easily fixed. A friend of mine, cleverest woman I know, will attend to that—Madame Vulture. (*Grins and nods, then goes.*)

(JOHNSON *turns round, and there, standing just behind him, is this MADAME VULTURE, a tall thin creature in a black feathered evening dress, with the mask face of a vulture, and with hands that have immensely long sharp blood-red nails, like talons. A horrible figure. JOHNSON stares at her, startled and fascinated.*)

MADAME VULTURE (*with a ghastly playfulness*). Now I know what you gentlemen are. You won't have this, and you will have that. No use my trying to suit you unless I know what it is you fancy. Big, medium, little? Brunette, red-head, blonde? Experienced or very young? White, I suppose?

JOHNSON. Certainly. Must be white.

MADAME VULTURE (*a good saleswoman*). I think you're wise, though of course, some gentlemen have exotic tastes. White, then. And blonde perhaps? Why not try a nice blonde?

JOHNSON. A nice li'l' blonde would just suit me.

MADAME VULTURE. Or—of course—a pretty little brunette?

JOHNSON. Certainly. Just right.

MADAME VULTURE. Not too big, not too old, not too experienced, eh?

JOHNSON (*coarsely*). You've got the idea.

MADAME VULTURE. Well, now, I have the very thing for you. Absolutely delightful, and quite fresh. Only just come into my hands. (*These hands are very close to his face.*)

JOHNSON (*staring at them*). I don't like your hands.

MADAME VULTURE (*with sinister playfulness*). Now, now, Mr. Johnson, don't be naughty.

JOHNSON (*with drunken idiocy*). I'm very naughty—fella.

MADAME VULTURE. I can see you are. Now then, what do you say to this nice fresh little girl?

JOHNSON. Let's have a look at her.

MADAME VULTURE. You understand, my clients are all gentlemen of means—— I don't believe in a cheap trade—so——

JOHNSON (*giving her some notes*). Oh—you won't find me mean—so long as you deliver the goods all right.

MADAME VULTURE. The goods, you will see, Mr. Johnson, will be absolutely charming, just what you want.

(*She goes. JOHNSON takes another drink, giggles a little, and the dancing begins again. Then suddenly the music stops, everybody is still, and all the lights fade out except a single white light on JOHNSON. It is as if time*

*were held up and JOHNSON now spoke from a deeper self.)*

JOHNSON (*in slow, deep tone*). Here I sit waiting—a fool. I know I am a fool, yet I know too I am no fool. All this has always been folly before, but now perhaps, just for once, the miracle may happen. . . . They say I am half-animal, half-god. . . . Yet I do not think it is entirely the animal in me that is waiting here, for the animal must be a simple creature, with a few sharp needs, easily satisfied. . . . But this is not simple, this lighted and scented jungle, where everything has been so carefully devised to taste bitter-sweet, half-rotten. . . . Even if the animal in me is fed and tickled, it is to arouse the god, grumbling in his sleep. . . . I make a beast of myself, but the beast is no simple animal, though it may have a shaggy hide and claws. . . . It has the god's head, like the Sphinx, which perhaps looks calm because once, ages ago, in a night as big as our centuries, it slaked all its passion. . . . And even here and now, as I sit slavering, sweating and lustful as a cow-led bull, I know that I wish for peace . . . Let a miracle be worked for me-the-beast, so that the beast shall be satisfied and I shall have peace . . . without regret . . . without regret . . .

*(The lights come up again. The dancing continues. He is his giggling drunken self again. The HEAD-WAITER now comes to him. But now the HEAD-WAITER wears a mask, half-human, half like a*

*toad. And all the guests and waiters are now seen to be grotesquely masked.)*

HEADWAITER. Everything all right, sir?

JOHNSON (*drunkenly, staring*). Who are you?

HEADWAITER. Maitre d'hotel, sir.

JOHNSON (*solemnly*). But you've got a face like a Toad.

HEADWAITER. That's right, sir. Toad is the name.

JOHNSON (*vaguely, but grandly*). Well—treat me all right—and I'll be all right with you. When I've had few more drinks and got nice li'l' girl, life'll be fine, fine. I can feel it bubbling up—fine, fine stuff. Sitting on top o' the world, I am. An' that's where you've got to sit, right on top of it.

*(The floor has now been cleared, as if for a floor show, and in a hard bright light and to fast loud music four tap-dancers, two young men in evening clothes and top hats, and two girls, almost naked but wearing coloured top hats, do a fast tap routine. When they have done, there is some applause from the masked guests sitting round, and JOHNSON joins in with enthusiasm. There is a roll on the drum, and there appears on the little platform at the back, where there is a microphone, the compère of the floor show, who is in evening dress, but also wears the mortar-board and the M.A. gown of the unpleasant schoolmaster whom we saw in the office. The truth is that he is both the compère*

*of the floor show and that unpleasant schoolmaster, one of those telescoped personalities we often meet in dreams.)*

COMPERE-SCHOOLMASTER (*at microphone*). And now friends, before commencing our floor show, in which I can promise you a big surprise, I want you to give a hand to the boy who's been stealing the front pages and winning all hearts lately—the new champ—Jim Gorilla!

*(A powerful fellow in evening dress, wearing a huge grinning monkey-mask, comes forward, holding his hands together above his head in the manner of a boxer saluting his audience. He is loudly applauded, JOHNSON being prominent among the applauders. GORILLA shakes hands with JOHNSON, who is still sitting at his table. Then one of PORKER's girls—it might be DOT or it might be MAISIE; who knows?—rushes forward to embrace GORILLA, who carries her off to his table.)*

COMPERE-SCHOOLMASTER (*at microphone*). And now, friends, a new novelty act, the first time here, and I know it will be a socko number. Robert Johnson—who will make an exhibition of himself. Give him a hand, friends.

JOHNSON (*staggering up, surprised*). Wha'—me?

COMPERE-SCHOOLMASTER (*at microphone, pointing*). Robert Johnson!

*(JOHNSON is now in the centre of the floor, with*

*the lights on him, and the other guests all sitting round watching. We hear the soft jigging music suitable for a clown routine.)*

JOHNSON (*drunkenly*). I dunno wha's the idea—but you're all very nice people—— I'm a nice fella too—and so le's all be jolly—wha' about a drink?

*(They laugh at him. And now a waiter wearing a clown's mask brings on a small table, chair, and large trick bottle of champagne. He puts down the table, offers the chair to JOHNSON, then pulls it away so that JOHNSON falls heavily, protesting amidst laughter. When JOHNSON is finally seated, there is comic business with the trick champagne. WAITER pretends to rub it in JOHNSON'S hair, and so forth. Finally, when WAITER goes, JOHNSON is sitting on the floor, very silly, singing and giggling, while the other guests laugh at him. There should be more and more cruelty in their laughter.)*

JOHNSON (*in maudlin style*). Y'know, funny thing about me is—they think I'm nice respec'able man—they do, honestly. Responshible position in old firm. Wife, son, daughter. All very, very respec'able. 'Morning, Mr. Shonson. 'Morning, Mr. Shonson. 'Evening, Shonson. How are you to-day? Anything further, Mr. Shonson? All like that, see? Jus' rubbish. All the time jus' a clown, tha's me—a clown. A nice clown, mark you—oh, yes—a nice, nice clown—— (*Giggles*).



*(The other guests throws rolls of bread at him, one idiotic youth coming very close and throwing his roll very savagely. JOHNSON does not like this, and scrambles to his feet, rather suspicious but filled with self-pity.)*

JOHNSON. Steady—steady—don' be too rough with poor ol' Shonson—poor ol' boy! Where's nice li'l' girl they promised me, eh?

GORILLA *(at back)*. Oh, she'll be along.

JOHNSON *(singing drunkenly)*. We're going to have good ti-ime. We're all going to have good ti-ime.

CHARLIE *(from back, calling loudly)*. Got any money, Johnson old boy?

JOHNSON *(with drunken dignity)*. Certainly, certainly got money. Want shome? *(Flings up handful of notes.)* Take it, take it, take it. Nothing to me. I'm Robert Johnson. Take it all.

*(He flings up several handfuls of notes and now there is a scrimmage round him of the male guests, all fighting to pick up the notes. JOHNSON, muttering about the little girl they promised him, pushes his way out, and as soon as he does all the lights on this dance floor rapidly fade. Meanwhile, curtains have been drawn to reveal a little private room, almost entirely filled by a divan. It should be flooded with coloured light—light purple or deep pink. We see JOHNSON sitting on this divan, and now CHARLIE comes into this little room, wearing a wolf's mask.)*

CHARLIE. Now then, old boy, see you've found the right place.

JOHNSON (*surprised and suspicious*). You—Charlie?

CHARLIE. Sure—your old pal!

JOHNSON. You're looking dam' queer now, Charlie. Where's the lil' girl you promised me?

CHARLIE. Here she is.

(*He steps back and MADAME VULTURE comes in, bringing with her a young girl in a simple (preferably white) evening dress and wearing a domino mask of the same material.*)

MADAME VULTURE. Here she is, just what you wanted. (*To the GIRL, as she shrinks.*) Don't be a fool. Have a good time.

(*She laughs and CHARLIE laughs in a wolf-like manner and they go. JOHNSON tries to pull the GIRL nearer to him, but she shrinks away. This goes on throughout his dialogue that follows. The GIRL always resists but with the minimum of effort, shrinking and slightly pulling herself away from him rather than actively resisting him. Beginning the whole scene in a sullen, suspicious, bestial mood, he rapidly gets worse as it develops.*)

JOHNSON. And a very nice lil' piece too. Very nice. Don't be silly. Nobody's going to hurt you. Jus' going to have a good time. (*As she resists again, angrily*) Wha's the idea, eh? Who d'you think you are, anyhow? Lemme tell you, you're jus' a lil' bit, tha's

all, jus' a tuppenny-hapenny lil' bit o' fluff. Bought an' paid for too, don' forget that. An' don' think I'm not good enough for you, because lemme tell you I am. Man of the world I am. Worth a dozen o' the sort o' young sprigs you like. Come here. I'm here to have a good time and I've paid for it and I'll see I get it. And if you won't be a sport and join in, I'll damn well make you, see? Let's have a look at you. First thing, we'll have that silly mask off. Come on, take it off.

*(She shakes her head, succeeds in turning away again and evading his efforts to remove the mask himself, but now we can hear her crying. This makes him angrier.)*

JOHNSON. Oh—for God's sake—don't start crying. What good are you, anyway? Come on, come on, you miserable little sniffer—if you think I'm going to be soft with you, let you get away with that stuff, you're all wrong. I know all the tricks, don't forget. Come on.

*(Now he has seized her very roughly, but at this moment a YOUTH, wearing an ordinary lounge suit, but masked like the girl, dashes into the scene.)*

YOUTH. Leave her alone.

JOHNSON *(very angrily)*. Now don't *you* start interfering, whoever you are, because I won't stand for it. Clear out.

*(He leaves the GIRL to threaten the YOUTH, which*

*gives the GIRL a chance to slip past him, and the YOUTH hurries out of this little room on to the dance floor, which is now half-lit and is seen to be deserted.)*

JOHNSON (*mad with rage, coming out of little room*).  
Oh—no—you don't. You two aren't going to make a monkey out of me. Damn you, get out!

*(He pulls the GIRL out of the YOUTH's grasp and flings her to one side, then after a short struggle with the YOUTH, JOHNSON picks up a knife from the nearest table and in a blind fury, grunting, he repeatedly stabs the YOUTH, who sinks, moaning. JOHNSON, exhausted, panting, leans against the nearest table. The GIRL gives a scream and hurries across to the YOUTH, raising his head from the floor. Neither is wearing a mask now, and we recognise them as FREDa and RICHARD.)*

FREDa (*in anguish*). Richard, Richard!

*(JOHNSON turns and bends down and looks with horror into the two faces, then comes staggering down.)*

JOHNSON (*whispering in horror*). Freda! Richard!  
Oh God!—I didn't know. I didn't know.

*(All the night club people, guests and waiters, all masked, now come crowding down, moving slowly in a dense mass, hiding FREDa and RICHARD. They all make a strange hissing sound.)*

JOHNSON (*still whispering*). Oh God! What did I do?

A VOICE FROM THE CROWD (*frightened*). He's coming, he's coming.

*(The crowd now changes its hissing to a queer low moaning and they all point forward, while slowly retreating. JOHNSON notices this.)*

JOHNSON (*in dull, hopeless tone*). Something terrible comes . . . terrible to them, but no longer terrible to me, because now I am already in Hell. . . . There cannot be a deeper Hell than this. . . . I see now that Hell is only a place where you can still think and remember. . . . I am not afraid. . . . I can even hope, for perhaps I only wait my turn to be blotted out, a thing badly made at last thrown on the dust heap. . . .

*(The crowd have vanished now. There is no light anywhere but on JOHNSON himself, who is looking towards us. Now the music, which has been keeping up a thin high tremulo, flares into heavy menacing brass, with the theme we heard at the end of ACT ONE. A tall, majestic, cloaked figure now appears, walking into the scene from our side of it. As soon as he is near JOHNSON, he turns and we see again the terrible shining death's head. There is a pause.)*

JOHNSON. If you are Death, I hope you are his very self, final, omnipotent, extinguishing for ever the last glimmer of memory. . . . If you are that Death, I am not afraid. . . . I welcome you. . . .

Come, blot me out for good and all . . . that is all I am fit for, to be destroyed.

THE FIGURE (*in deep mocking tone*). And what of the thudding of the clay on the coffin, the white maggots and the worms?

JOHNSON. Now that I still live but am in Hell, they are a kind of peace. The world will be cleaner when my brain has rotted and the worms have eaten me to the bone. (*A pause, then loudly, angrily.*) Well—have you no force in your arm or even no quick poison in your breath?

THE FIGURE (*removing mask, calmly*). I said you were a fool, Robert.

JOHNSON (*staring*). You again!

THE FIGURE (*rather amused*). A fool, I said, Robert.

JOHNSON (*tragically*). You do not know me. I am worse than a fool now.

THE FIGURE (*coolly*). No, no. Don't flatter yourself.

JOHNSON (*distressed*). Didn't you see? My own daughter—my son—were here—and I—and I—oh! horrible, horrible!

THE FIGURE (*going over to him*). There are no human instruments created solely for our satisfaction, Robert. There are only persons. They are all sons and daughters, you see.

JOHNSON. I see that—and a thousand other things—now. But too late! My own children——

THE FIGURE (*sharply*). No, no. Masks and shadows and dreams!

JOHNSON (*vehemently*). They came here, I tell you, and I didn't know them—and I——

THE FIGURE (*with authority*). They never came here. Listen!

RICHARD'S VOICE (*exactly as in last scene*). I thought I'd tell him it was all right and I was sorry and all that, but it was too late then—he couldn't understand what anybody was saying to him.

FREDA'S VOICE (*as before*). Perhaps if you thought it, he got it somehow. You know, I used to think of him as being quite old——

RICHARD'S VOICE (*as before*). Lord yes!—so did I. Terribly old.

FREDA'S VOICE (*as before*). I know. Well, just lately I've suddenly seen he isn't really old—I mean—he wasn't. . . .

JOHNSON. Thank God for His mercy! If they were only shadows, that is no merit of mine. What I did, I did.

THE FIGURE. No, for these shadows were of your own making, and it was yourself reproaching yourself. Listen!

CLERGYMAN'S VOICE. If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die. Be not

deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners. . . .

JOHNSON (*alarmed*). A funeral service?

THE FIGURE. Yours.

JOHNSON. They think I'm dead?

THE FIGURE. Yes.

JOHNSON (*agitated*). And there they are—Jill, Freda, Richard—unhappy. And I'm here. Oh—horrible! What a swine I am!

THE FIGURE (*cheerfully, but gently*). No, no. A fool perhaps, an average sort of fool. (*Pauses, considering him.*) Robert, I think you'd better go on to the Inn now.

JOHNSON (*sharply*). I want to go back to my home, to tell them I'm not really dead—to try and comfort them.

THE FIGURE (*with great authority*). You can't go back. In that world you *are* really dead. To try and force your way back there would be to bring evil into your own house. You must take your road. But you can stay a little while at the Inn first.

JOHNSON. What inn is this?

THE FIGURE. Call it, if you like, the Inn at the End of the World. They are expecting you there.

JOHNSON. I have no money now. I flung it all away.

THE FIGURE. You will not need any.

JOHNSON. What shall I find there?



THE FIGURE. I do not know what things have illuminated your mind and touched your heart.

JOHNSON. But how do I go there?

THE FIGURE. That way will do.

*(He points, and JOHNSON turns. The small door behind him is now slowly opening and through it is flooding a golden light, very bright on the darkened stage. Very faintly we hear an exquisite strain of music.)*

THE FIGURE. And I hope you will be happy there.

JOHNSON (*sadly*). I don't deserve to be happy.

FIGURE (*in a ringing tone*). Then I think you may be.

*(As JOHNSON moves slowly towards the open door and the light, and the music swells up, down comes the curtain and the Act is at an end.)*

## ACT THREE

Once again we see the hall of JOHNSON's house, but now it is early evening, two days after the funeral, and the house looks much warmer and more cheerful than it did before. Through the door from the drawing-room come MR. CLAYTON and RICHARD. They go to the stand for MR. CLAYTON's hat and coat.

RICHARD. It was awfully good of you to come along, Mr. Clayton.

CLAYTON. No, no. Least I could do—help to get things straightened out for you. (*Pauses, regarding him.*) You're uncommonly like your father, y'know.

RICHARD (*pleased*). That's what a lot of people say.

CLAYTON. Yes, you remind me of him as he was when he first came to us as a junior clerk—though he'd be younger then than you are now.

RICHARD. Yes, he was.

CLAYTON (*a reminiscent old gentleman*). A bit careless at first, of course, like all youngsters, but a wonderfully steady and dependable fellow once he'd settled down. I was just remembering, in there, the time when I first promoted him to his own desk. We used to

make a little ceremony of it in those days in the City—glass of wine together, that sort of thing.

(GEORGE NOBLE and FREDa now come out of the drawing-room, and CLAYTON, ready to go, looks across at NOBLE.)

CLAYTON. I don't think you go my way, Mr. Noble, do you?

NOBLE. No, 'fraid I don't.

CLAYTON. Well, I'll be going. (*Shaking hands with NOBLE and FREDa.*) And my best respects to your mother, young lady. Good night.

NOBLE AND FREDa. Good night.

(RICHARD goes out with CLAYTON, while NOBLE and FREDa go to the stand for NOBLE's hat and coat, and NOBLE continues a conversation obviously begun in the drawing-room.)

NOBLE. Yes, he was a fine chap all right, Robert was. Always said so, ever since we stopped fighting when we were kids. He did me many a good turn.

FREDa. I'm glad.

NOBLE (*suddenly remembering, with humorous emphasis*). Mind you, Freda, I once did him a tremendous good turn. In fact, if I hadn't, you wouldn't be here.

FREDa (*amused*). Why? What do you mean?

NOBLE (*chuckling*). It was I who first introduced your father to your mother. At a dance—oh—must be nearly thirty years ago. I was thinking about it when we were talking in there. Funny how these

things suddenly come back. I could almost remember the very tunes they played that night. (*They move.*)

FREDA (*going*). I wish you'd tell me sometime, Uncle George.

NOBLE (*going*). Tell you what, Freda?

FREDA (*smilingly, as they are at door*). Tell me what were the tunes they played that night at the dance.

(*They have gone out, and now, from the opposite side, JILL enters slowly, stopping before she arrives in the centre. She is still in black, of course but she is no longer the wan figure we saw before. FREDA and RICHARD, talking quietly, come in from the other side. FREDA suddenly sees her mother standing there.*)

FREDA (*happily surprised*): Why—mother—you look different.

JILL (*smiling, holding out a hand*). I know, darling—and I feel different. (*They go over to her.*) You see, I know. I suddenly saw—quite clearly—everything's all right—really all right—now. . . .

(*And as she smiles at her children, the light fades quickly, the scene goes, as we hear music again, first rather sombre but then quickening to a delicious little tune. . . .*

. . . We still hear the tune softly as we look at the Inn, which seems—as we shall soon hear it is—a rum place. At one side a large staircase comes down, almost at right angles to our line of sight, and

*underneath this staircase, where it makes a little wall, facing us, is a kind of cosy corner, with a small dining-table and some chairs, some bookshelves let into the wall, a curtained window, and a few framed photographs and small oldish pictures. On the other side is a large window, through which light is streaming. Farther back there does not seem to be anything very much—we merely have a vague impression of a high curtain making a shadowy back wall. JOHNSON enters, wearing a thick travelling overcoat and underneath that a country suit. He is just removing his bowler hat. Behind him there enters the inn PORTER, a stalwart, pleasant-faced fellow, who is carrying JOHNSON'S small bag. JOHNSON looks about him, still bewildered but now quite pleasantly bewildered.)*

PORTER. Now, sir, I'll put your bag and coat where I can lay hands on 'em the minute they're wanted.

JOHNSON (*handing over his hat and coat*). Good!

PORTER (*who has taken the coat*). Nice thick coat too, sir—and you're quite right, for it gets cold here late at night. High up, you see, that's what we are—high up, Mr. Johnson.

JOHNSON (*surprised*). How do you know my name?

PORTER (*smiling*). Oh—we were expecting you.

JOHNSON. But I don't see how you could have been expecting me.

PORTER (*who is perhaps more artful than he looks*). Why, sir, don't you like being expected?

JOHNSON. Well—yes—— I suppose we all do.

PORTER (*as if that settles it*). Well, there you are, sir.

(JOHNSON gives him a puzzled glance, then moves down a pace or two, looking about him. Then he sees that the PORTER is still waiting, as if for a tip, and so feels in his pockets.)

JOHNSON. Oh—er—sorry. I don't seem to have any money with me.

PORTER (*coming forward again*). That's all right, sir. Don't take money here. No use for it. But—there's other and better ways of saying "Thank you," y'know, sir.

JOHNSON (*staring at him*). I don't understand you. (*Then, with sudden recognition*.) Here, but wait a minute! I know you.

PORTER (*pleased*). Ah—now then, you're talking, sir. And that's what we like here. No money—but just what you did now, sir—letting your face light up.

JOHNSON (*triumphantly*). I know—I know!

PORTER (*chuckling*). Are you sure, sir?

JOHNSON (*triumphantly*). Yes, of course I am. You're Jim Kirkland.

PORTER. Right, sir! Dead right!

JOHNSON (*all happy reminiscence*). Why, Jim, you were one of my great heroes. Good Lord!—I

remember my father taking me to the Lancashire match for a birthday treat—I must have been about twelve—and I saw you make a hundred and seventy-eight not out. What an innings! Comes back to me now, clear as crystal. A smoking hot morning in July. I can smell the tar on the streets. I can taste the ginger beer I had. I can still see your bat flashing in the sun. What a day! Jim Kirkland—— (*He shakes hands with boyish enthusiasm.*) This is a great moment for me.

PORTER. Proud and happy, sir, proud and happy!

JOHNSON. There's a poem about old cricketers, Jim. Did you ever read it? How did it end? "As the run-stealers flicker to and fro, to and fro—— Oh—my Hornby and my Barlow long ago."

PORTER. That's it, sir. Well—— (*As if about to go.*)

JOHNSON. But what are *you* doing here?

PORTER (*smiling*). Why, sir, meeting you. (*Confidentially.*) It's a rum place, this, you'll see.

JOHNSON (*dropping his voice a little*). I know. That window. Already, outside, it keeps changing.

*(He looks towards the corner under the staircase, and as soon as he does this, a warm light illuminates this corner and the little pictures and photographs seem to glow.)*

JOHNSON. And I'm sure some of these pictures and photographs—— (*Goes to examine them.*) Why, that's the photograph we had taken at school. I

haven't seen it for over thirty years. (*Sees others.*) And this used to be in my bedroom at home. It's the very same one. And that. No—this wasn't at home—it was at my grandfather's—I used to stare at it for hours—— Good Lord!—I know them all, every one. That one I bought myself, first I ever bought—cost me twelve-and-six at a little second-hand shop. You're right, Jim—— (*He turns round.*) —This is a——

*(But the PORTER has gone. JOHNSON is bewildered. We hear, very faintly, the children's prayer theme from Humperdinck's opera. JOHNSON sits down, and now a woman's voice is heard, as if reading to a child.)*

WOMAN'S VOICE. Near a great forest there lived a poor wood-cutter with his wife and his two children. The boy was called Hansel and the girl Gretel. The wood-cutter was very poor indeed, and once when there was a famine in that land he could no longer give his wife and children their daily bread. . . .

JOHNSON (*sharply, unconsciously*). Mother!

*(But the voice has stopped. A little waiter has appeared, an oldish chap with white hair and a droll withered-apple face, and as soon as we have a good look at him we can see the old clown look he has. He has one of those rusty Cockney voices so many of the old comedians had, and his name is ALBERT GOOP.)*



ALBERT. Mr. Johnson, isn't it, sir?

JOHNSON. Yes.

ALBERT (*smiling*). You'll find everything ready, sir, when you are. The lady was in early, telling me what you liked.

JOHNSON (*surprised*). The lady?

ALBERT. Yes, sir, *your* lady. (*Now, with deliberate comical air.*) So you'll find everything in good trim. I say you'll find everything in good trim.

JOHNSON (*staring at him*). I say—now—wait a minute——

ALBERT (*who can't wait*). Yes, sir. Albert Goop. In the pantomimes at the old Theatre Royal.

JOHNSON (*triumphantly*). Of course!

ALBERT (*almost doing his old act now*). Right, sir. And don't forget the little cane. (*Produces one.*) I say don't forget the little cane.

JOHNSON. You used to be the Baron in *Cinderella* and the captain of the ship in *Robinson Crusoe*, and you always had your little cane, and said things twice. I used to spend hours and hours imitating you when I was a kid. Why, we all worshipped you, Albert Goopl

ALBERT (*completely the comedian now, doing steps and everything*). Every Christmas at the old Theatre Royal, Longfield, there was Albert with his cane and a big red nose. I say there was Albert with his cane and a big red nose. Ah—happy days, sir, happy days!

JOHNSON. Lord!—I'd count the weeks to those pantomimes—and the next sight of you, Albert.

ALBERT (*doing a droll step*). Thank you very much. (*And now JOHNSON says it with him and does the step too.*)  
I say thank you very much.

(*JOHNSON laughs, then stares in astonishment out of the window, finally grinning like a schoolboy.*)

JOHNSON. Albert—I distinctly saw a stage coach go down that road—and I'll swear Mr. Pickwick was on it, with Sam Weller—and—I think—fat old Mr. Weller was driving. What do you think about that, Albert?

ALBERT. Doesn't surprise me. I say it doesn't surprise me. You can see anything through that window. I once saw 'alf the bill at the old Middlesex through it—Dan Leno, R. G. Knowles, Lottie Collins, everybody—then—gone like a puff o' smoke—I say gone like a puff o' smoke.

JOHNSON. By Jove, Albert—you know, Jim Kirkland's right. It's a rum place, this.

ALBERT. Rum! It's the rummest you ever saw, this is. Why, it hasn't started on you yet. You wait—I say you wait.

JOHNSON. Wait for what, Albert?

ALBERT. Now don't ask questions, sir. Just let things happen. That's the way to go on here, sir—just let things happen.

JOHNSON. Then I'll wait for the lady, Albert.

ALBERT. She'll appreciate it, sir. I say she'll appreciate it.

*(They are now standing together near the foot of the stairs, and from farther up the stairs we hear the sound of a boy's voice. They both look up.)*

BOY'S VOICE. Well, where is he then? I want to talk to him.

JOHNSON *(startled)*. Why, that's Tom's voice.

ALBERT. Your brother, sir?

JOHNSON. Yes, but he was killed in the War——

ALBERT *(baffled)*. War? What war?

*(Tom comes running down the stairs. He is a fine-looking lad in his middle teens, dressed in the style of thirty-five years ago.)*

TOM. Bob, you chump! Now then, Albert, buzz off—this is private. *(ALBERT goes.)* Just like you, Bob, be so slow. You ought to have known this is the place to be in. Always keep me waiting, you old head.

JOHNSON *(slowly, rather painfully)*. Sorry, Tom. I don't—well, I suppose I didn't know the way——

TOM *(indicating the window)*. Look there!

JOHNSON *(staring)*. Why—it's exactly what we used to see from our bedroom at that farm we stayed at those three summers. Look—the two haystacks—the road dipping down—the pond we had the raft on—the old cart——

TOM. The one you fell off, you ass.

JOHNSON (*a boy again*). Well, don't forget you fell in the pond.

(*As he looks again, we hear the music that JOHNSON listened to in the office, and now the girl's voice comes in again, high and trailing. JOHNSON listens—then speaks very quietly.*)

JOHNSON. I've heard that before, in the strangest places, and it never lasts long. But at least it seems to belong here, and it never did anywhere before.

TOM. What are you talking about?

JOHNSON. Didn't you hear it?

TOM. I didn't hear anything. Oh—Lord!—look who's here.

(*MORRISON, a pleasant-looking, middle-aged school-master, wearing an old blazer and smoking a pipe, has just entered, in the corner by the staircase, and now the warm light comes on there.*)

JOHNSON (*turning*). Mr. Morrison!

MORRISON (*coolly*). Hello! Both Johnsons at once.

TOM. Yes, sir, but I'm pushing off. See you later, Bob.

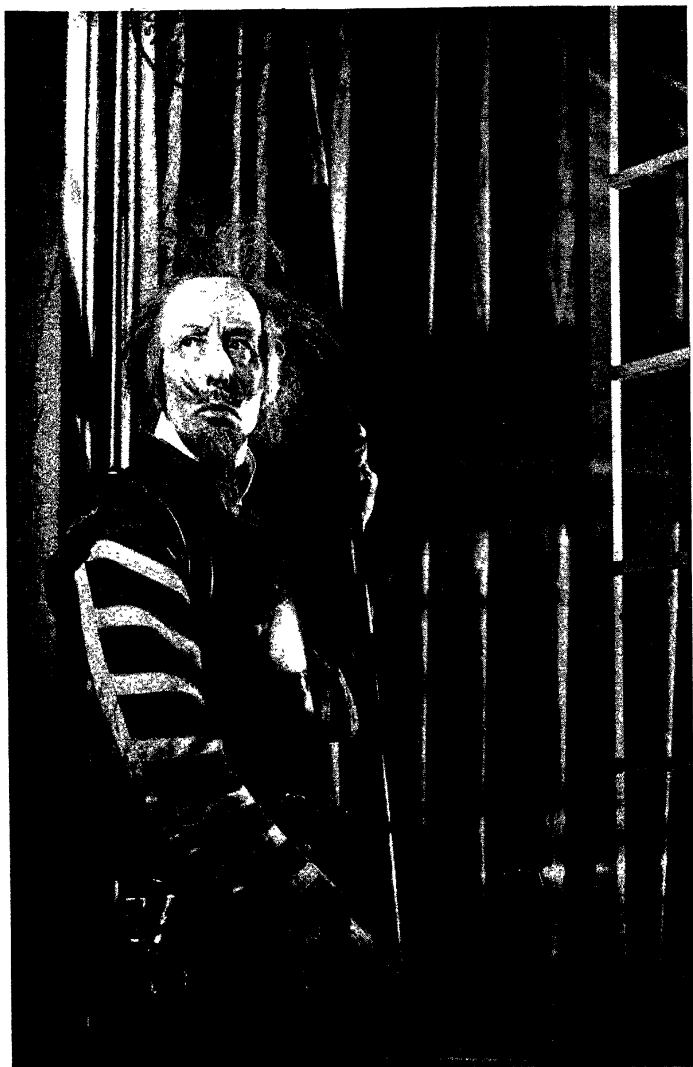
JOHNSON (*with sudden urgency*). Tom!

TOM (*cheerfully, in a hurry, going upstairs*). All right, chump, I'll see you later. I want to talk to old funny-face upstairs about some bait he promised me.

JOHNSON (*going to foot of stairs and calling, distressed*). Tom! Tom!

MORRISON (*as JOHNSON slowly comes nearer*). Tom's





DON QUIXOTE AT THE WINDOW

had enough of my company. I'm afraid he doesn't like schoolmasters, even out of hours. (*Pauses, then noting JOHNSON'S distress.*) Hello, what's worrying you, Robert?

JOHNSON (*with an effort*). It was—only seeing Tom again—after so long a time——

MORRISON. Ah—there's none of that time here, y'know. You must have brought a bit of it with you. Odd place this, Robert. Noticed the books?

JOHNSON (*in boyish tones*). No, sir.

MORRISON (*smiling*). And I imagined I'd taught you to appreciate good literature. Have a look.

JOHNSON (*going up to the books*). Why, they're all my old ones. Here's my old copy of *Don Quixote*. (*Turns the pages.*) With all the pictures. I remember the first time I read this. It was one Christmas, a real snowy Christmas, and I'd had to go to bed with a snivelling cold—and I remember curling up in bed, very cosy, with the snow thickening on the window panes and the cold blue daylight dying—and first staring at the pictures——

(*As he stands there, saying this, with the book in his hand, the light in that corner fades rapidly, and a bright moonlight streams through the window opposite, and we hear a lance tapping at the sill. The next moment, DON QUIXOTE, wearing old armour but no headpiece, is standing there, his white hair and beard and long lined fantastic face very sharply*

*defined by the light, which also catches JOHNSON'S face in a moment or two, when he steps forward.)*

DON QUIXOTE (*gravely*). Your pardon, sirs, but this night should bring me to one of the most famous adventures that ever was seen, for this whole region abounds with wicked enchanters and there are great wrongs to be redressed. . . .

JOHNSON (*stepping forward, eagerly*). Yes, just the same. Don Quixote, you don't know me, but I remember you.

DON QUIXOTE. I seem to remember a boy in an upstairs room of a small house, far away, one winter's night——

JOHNSON (*eagerly*). Yes, I was that boy. But I didn't think you'd remember.

DON QUIXOTE (*with a noble breadth*). Sir, your imagination, your memory of us, your affection for us, these are our life—all that we have.

JOHNSON. Yes, I think I understand that.

DON QUIXOTE. Your great poet once said that the best of our kind are but shadows, though I think he knew that your kind too—who appear so solid to yourselves for a little time—are also only shadows. And perhaps you too take life from the mind that beholds you and your little tale, so that you live as we must do, in another and greater being's imagination, memory and affection. (*Pauses.*) Do you notice any change in me?



JOHNSON (*gently, hesitantly*). Only—perhaps—you seem a trifle older——

DON QUIXOTE (*sadly*). Yes. You see, we are being forgotten. We are shadows even to shadows, and play in a dream within a dream.

JOHNSON (*with feeling*). I am glad to have seen you again, Don Quixote.

DON QUIXOTE (*in new and ringing tone*). Sir, I take life from your remembrance. If you should see my squire, Sancho Panza, tell him to follow me instantly along the highroad. Farewell, good sirs.

*(He salutes them and disappears. The bright moonlight goes with him, and now JOHNSON is back in the lighted corner, looking at the books again.)*

JOHNSON. Yes, yes. They're all my old ones. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. The *Arabian Nights* I used to crayon. The Shakespeare I had at school with you.

*(As he stands there, with MORRISON, looking at the books, we hear voices, masculine and feminine, not coming from any one place, speaking famous lines.)*

A VOICE. Daffodils,

That come before the swallow dares and  
take

The winds of March with beauty . . .

ANOTHER VOICE. Will no one tell me what she sings?

Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things  
And battles long ago. . . .

ANOTHER VOICE.

The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs;  
the deep

Moans round with many voices. Come, my  
friends,

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. . . .

ANOTHER VOICE. I cannot praise a fugitive and  
cloister'd virtue, unexercised and unbreath'd, that  
never sallies out and sees her adversary. . . .

ANOTHER VOICE. Or ever the silver cord be loosed,  
or the golden bowl be broken. . . .

Men must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither:  
Ripeness is all . . .

ANOTHER VOICE. The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall  
not want . . .

JOHNSON (*sitting, slowly and regretfully*). Ever since I  
saw you last, these many years, I think I have been  
foolish and ignorant, for you taught me long ago that  
in these voices, which come so quickly when we call  
on them, I would find wisdom and beauty. Though  
I remembered this, and sometimes, when business was  
not pressing and pleasure began to pall, I heard echoes  
of the voices again, I did not ask them to give me  
their treasure. But always I felt there was a time ahead  
when at last I could sit by the fire and listen to them  
again; and now it seems there is no such time for me,  
only this brief last hour. . . .

MORRISON. It doesn't matter, Robert. We don't know what Time is, let alone how it shall be divided for us. And this isn't the last frontier of Beauty. (*In brisker tone.*) I'm glad to have seen you again, Robert.

JOHNSON (*a boy again, shyly*). And I you, sir. I always liked you the best, y'know, sir.

MORRISON (*smiling*). If you hadn't I shouldn't have been here. Well—I must go.

(*As MORRISON goes, a barman in a striped jacket comes round the corner of the staircase into the little scene, carrying a tray with two wine-glasses on it. This BARMAN approaches JOHNSON as the latter watches MORRISON go.*)

BARMAN. Here you are, Mr. Johnson. Nice glass o' wine too.

JOHNSON (*turning*). Oh—thanks. Here, I say, I've seen you before somewhere.

BARMAN. Now I'll bet you can't remember, Mr. Johnson. I said to Albert when I begged him to let me bring these in and just do something for you, I said: "I'll bet he won't remember me."

JOHNSON. A street somewhere . . . a wet night. . . .

BARMAN. You're getting it, sir, you're getting it. I was down and out, and I'd been along to a place near Cheapside to try and get a caretaker's job, and I hadn't got it and I felt like chucking myself in the river. And I stopped you and asked you if you could spare a copper——

JOHNSON. Yes, I remember now. I'd just had a bit of luck at the office.

BARMAN. You said so, when you gave me that ten bob. And that ten bob made all the difference. It made me feel better, to start with, and then I spent it getting a train up to my sister's, and her husband found me a bit of a job, and so I started all over again. In a few months I was a different chap altogether from the one that stopped you that night. All on account o' that ten bob, Mr. Johnson.

JOHNSON. Yes, but how do you know my name?

BARMAN (*chuckling*). Ah—there isn't much we don't know round here, sir. Well, now, Mr. Clayton ordered these two glasses of wine.

JOHNSON (*surprised*). Mr. Clayton?

BARMAN. That's right, sir. Your boss, isn't he?

JOHNSON. He was.

BARMAN. And your friend too before you'd finished, eh, sir?

JOHNSON. Yes. my friend too.

BARMAN (*chuckling*). Wouldn't be here if he wasn't. And here he is, right on the dot.

*(And so he is, not the CLAYTON we met in the hall, of course, but twenty-five years younger, dressed in business clothes of a pre-War cut. He is in good spirits, all smiling.)*

CLAYTON. Ah—thanks. (BARMAN goes. JOHNSON and CLAYTON both take glasses.) Well, Johnson, I'm glad you could join me in a glass of wine.

JOHNSON (*shyly, the junior clerk again*). It's very good of you, Mr. Clayton.

CLAYTON. Not at all. Always our custom here, y'know.

JOHNSON (*eagerly, hopefully*). Sir—you don't mean —?

CLAYTON (*significantly*). Yes, my dear fellow. (*Raising glass.*) The firm!

JOHNSON (*raising his glass*). The firm! (*They drink.*)

CLAYTON (*sitting down*). Yes, Johnson, your probationary period is now over. We all feel you've worked very well. We all like you. And now I'm glad to say you may consider yourself definitely one of the London staff of Bolt, Cross and Clayton. And it will be your own fault, not ours, if you aren't with us a long time.

JOHNSON (*pleased*). I hope I am, sir.

CLAYTON. I hope so too. From now on, you'll have your own desk, of course, and the board has decided to raise your salary in accordance with our usual custom—by—seventy-five pounds a year.

JOHNSON (*delighted*). Thank you, sir. I'll try to do my best for the firm.

CLAYTON. That's all we ask, Johnson. Let's see—you're not married yet?

JOHNSON (*shyly*). No, Mr. Clayton.

CLAYTON. Thinking of it?

JOHNSON (*grinning, awkwardly*). Well—no—I'm not, sir. Haven't met her yet.

CLAYTON (*jovially*). You will, you will. You look to me like a marrying man, Johnson. (*Rising.*) Well, best of luck. I won't keep you. Expect you want to dance.

JOHNSON (*puzzled*). To dance?

*(The lights change, and now the staircase and all the space behind are lit with a greeny-blue light that has something ghostly about it, although it is by no means dim and subdued. The orchestra is softly playing the "Valse Bleu." A group of young people, girls and young men, all in pre-War evening clothes, come down the stairs, laughing and flirting, and then go waltzing away. The last to come down is GEORGE NOBLE, now a young sprig in his early twenties, with a glass of claret cup in his hand.)*

CLAYTON. There you are, you see.

*(He goes out, chuckling, and now the warm light in this cosy corner fades out, but where NOBLE is standing near the bottom of the stairs is now strongly lit, and JOHNSON walks into this light. The greeny-blue light has gone. We can only see JOHNSON and NOBLE, but we can still hear, very faintly, the "Valse Bleu.")*

NOBLE (*excitedly*). Well, Bob, don't say I never do you a good turn.

JOHNSON (*puzzled*). All right. But why, George?

NOBLE. Don't be an ass. You asked me to find out who she is, and I've found out who she is.

JOHNSON (*puzzled*). Who she is? (*But now he is suddenly young again, at that dance, waiting to be told who she is.*) Yes, of course. Sorry, George! Good work, old boy! Well, who is she? Where does she live?

NOBLE. That's better. Now that I've pulled it off, I thought you were going to have the cheek to pretend it didn't matter and you weren't completely dotty on the girl not half an hour ago.

JOHNSON (*eagerly*). Come on! Who is she?

NOBLE. Her name's Jill Gregg, and her mother's a widow, and they live out at Richmond.

JOHNSON (*slowly, wonderingly*). Jill Gregg—Jill!

NOBLE. *And* I've been introduced, *and* now I can introduce you, so what more do you want?

JOHNSON (*eagerly*). Nothing—except lead me to her.

NOBLE. Yes, if you don't look pretty smart about it, I'll cut you out myself. And even if I don't, there are plenty more who will, especially a hefty chappie with a dragoon's moustache who's putting in some heavy work with her.

JOHNSON (*gaily*). He won't have a chance. I'll show him.

NOBLE. All right, well get this into your fat head. I'll meet you outside the supper room in about ten minutes, and I'll have her there waiting for you—even if I've to have that bloke with the moustache thrown out. Right?

JOHNSON (*with enthusiasm*). George, you're a brick.

NOBLE. I know. Not that I think you'll get anywhere with her. Too much class for you, my boy—you'll see. Still, you can try. Outside the supper room—in ten minutes.

(NOBLE goes waltzing away. JOHNSON steps forward, as the lights begin to fade near the bottom of the staircase and come into the corner where the table and chairs are.)

JOHNSON. Good old George! (*Slowly, tasting it.*)

Jill. Jill Gregg. . . . Jill. . . . Richmond. . . . (*Then exultantly, as if remembering everything.*) Yes, yes. My Jill!

(Now there enters into the corner a small bearded doctor, dressed in the style of 1914, still putting away the last of his things into his black bag.)

DOCTOR (*with mock sternness*). Mr. Johnson!

JOHNSON (*coming forward, now an anxious young husband*). Yes—doctor?

DOCTOR. Didn't I tell you to clear out and stay out for a few hours—to take a walk—or play billiards—or even get drunk——?

JOHNSON (*apologetically*). I know. But I simply couldn't. I had to come back. (*Almost sweating with anxiety.*) Doctor—is it—is it—going to be all right?

DOCTOR (*teasing him*). As I told you before, why be so suspicious? Your wife's a sound healthy young woman, who's doing what Nature wants her to do.



JOHNSON (*gloomily*). I know. But Nature can want you to do something and then go and let you down when you do it.

DOCTOR (*easily*). Ah—that's where Science has to step in. (*In ordinary conversational style, though really teasing.*) I don't like this business over in Ireland. Officers at the Curragh saying they won't obey their own government. Can't have that, can we? But I've always been a Home Ruler myself. Are you?

JOHNSON (*who can't take this stuff in*). Oh—I dunno——

DOCTOR (*this is his opportunity*). Come, come, Mr. Johnson! A man in your position ought to take more interest in these things. We fathers—y'know——

JOHNSON (*staggered*). Fathers! Has it—happened?

DOCTOR. Of course it has. A fine boy—nearly eight pounds.

JOHNSON (*with tremendous excitement*). Oh—Christmas!—and how's Jill—my wife——?

DOCTOR (*smiling*). She's all right. Came through it very well. (*Suddenly stern.*) But you can't see her until nurse gives the word. (*At the door.*) Be sensible now!

JOHNSON (*enormously relieved and elated*). Sensible! Sensible be damned! I could pull up oak trees. (*The DOCTOR has gone now and the light in this corner is fading.*) Jill's all right. A boy—a fine boy—eight pounds of him. Oh gosh! Just what she wanted. A girl next—yes, must have a girl. A boy—then a girl——

(*As he says this, brilliant sunlight comes flashing through the window, and there, framed in it, are RICHARD and FREDa, gay in holiday clothes and a few years younger, perhaps, than they were in the hall scenes. In high spirits, they call through the open window.*)

RICHARD. Hoy, hoy! Dad!

FREDa (*gaily*). Don't pretend not to know us.

JOHNSON (*as he turns to look at them*). Here—wait a minute—(*for at this moment he does not know them.*)

RICHARD. Now, Dad, no funny stuff!

FREDa (*excitedly*). We got right to the top and saw for hundreds of miles, didn't we, Dick?

RICHARD (*who thinks he's a realist*). Well—fifty miles.

FREDa. Oh—much more than that. And some of it was awfully hard going——

RICHARD (*grinning*). She screeched in one place.

FREDa (*indignantly*). That was only because I tore my stocking. You know it was.

RICHARD. Oh well—she wasn't bad, really.

FREDa. And we had a marvellous day, except that you weren't with us. (*Pauses.*) What's the matter?

JOHNSON (*who has gone closer*). I'm sorry. I was just thinking—you're a fine pair—just what——

RICHARD. Now, Dad, stop it.

FREDa. Daddy, no teasing.

JOHNSON (*as it dawns*). You're my children?

FREDa. Of course we are.

JOHNSON (*hastily*). Yes, yes, of course you must be. Oh—this is great, isn't it? I'm sorry I was so stupid.

FREDA. Don't you want us?

JOHNSON. Of course I do. I tell you, it's—tremendous. Come inside, come in at once and talk to me.

RICHARD. No, Dad.

FREDA. We both agreed that wouldn't do, not to-night.

RICHARD. You don't want us here to-night.

JOHNSON (*bewildered*). I don't. How do you know I don't?

FREDA. We know the pair of you, when you're together, won't want us.

JOHNSON. The pair of us?

FREDA (*enthusiastically*). Yes. But to-morrow we'll all have an enormous day. And you're not to be lazy.

RICHARD (*also with enthusiasm*). We'll start just after breakfast, and climb everything there is.

JOHNSON (*dubiously*). To-morrow . . . ?

RICHARD (*confidently*). Yes, to-morrow. Don't you believe in to-morrow?

FREDA (*laughingly*). To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow—(*Breaks off because she sees something in his face. Concerned now.*) What's the matter, father?

JOHNSON (*slowly*). Father! How strange that is! Frightening too!

FREDA. Tell us—please! You don't *tell* us enough.

RICHARD. That's true, Dad. Don't be so grand and aloof.

JOHNSON (*earnestly*). You know, I've never felt grand and aloof. Since you stopped being small children, I've simply been shy. Sometimes I've even trumbled, not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't find the sense and courage to say to you what I wanted to say. Will you forgive me?

FREDA. But there's nothing to forgive. And we knew how you felt.

RICHARD. Didn't you with your father?

JOHNSON (*slowly*). Yes, I suppose I did. But there ought to have been many a word spoken between us—I mean, between you two and me—when there was only silence or a stupid show of speech. I think I would have told you more if I'd felt I'd any real wisdom. But I felt I'd so little to give you worth having. For all I knew, you might have already found a wisdom I could never find. You might have stumbled upon the clue that I always missed, the clue to everything, the secret . . .

FREDA (*eagerly, as music plays softly*). There is a secret, isn't there? Like living in a house where there's a hidden treasure. Oh—Dad—you feel just as I do.

RICHARD. I know. And I believe I've got hold of something.

FREDA (*excitedly*). Richard, you haven't! But don't tell us now. Let's *all* talk about it—to-morrow.

RICHARD (*eagerly*). Right! To-morrow, eh, Dad?

JOHNSON (*slowly, painfully*). Yes . . . let's do that . . . to-morrow. (*He waits a moment, then gently.*) Good-bye, children.

RICHARD. Not good-bye——

FREDA (*softly*). Just—good night, father. (*And the light is fading rapidly behind them, and they seem to be drifting away.*)

JOHNSON (*softly*). Good night, Richard. Good night, Freda. Good night.

(*They have gone and the window is dark, but now the warm light has come on again in the cosy corner below the staircase, and as JOHNSON stands for a moment, ALBERT GOOP comes bustling in, to clear away the wine-glasses before laying the table.*)

ALBERT. Everything looking nice and cosy, sir, eh? What do you think of this place?

JOHNSON (*sitting down, quietly*). I recognise it now, Albert.

ALBERT. So you've seen it before, eh?

JOHNSON. Yes, I've caught a glimpse of it many a time, awake and in dreams. But I've never been here long—never long.

ALBERT (*chuckling softly*). Ah—no—that's the trouble, sir.

JOHNSON (*very quietly*). Sometimes I only saw it from a long way off, just the smoke of it rising at the

end of a good day. I think sometimes too, when I came nearer and the door opened for me, it all vanished, and I was left bewildered among the great clanking machinery of existence. But it was always here, waiting for me.

ALBERT. That's right, sir. I say that's right. Always waiting for you.

JOHNSON. I know I can't stay here long. I shall have to go soon. And still something—somebody—is missing. This isn't all. There's still an emptiness.

ALBERT (*chuckling, as he fusses with the glasses*). Yes—and why, sir? Because you're beginning to feel a bit lonely. Well, that's all right. I say that's all right. *They* know about that, and so of course they just keep you waiting long enough. Some calls that their artfulness—and so up to a point it is—but I say they know just what's right for a man, see, sir? Look at the very start of it all—Garden of Eden. Was Eve there right at the beginning? No fear. I say no fear! She waits a bit until he's feeling lonely, then up she pops and pretends she's just on time. *They* know. I say *they* know. (*Ready to go now.*) Well, sir, everything's ready when you are. (*As he moves away.*) I say everything's ready when you are. (*Stops, hearing sound upstairs.*) That's her now, sir, you'll see.

(ALBERT retires, chuckling. JOHNSON goes to the foot of the stairs and looks up. Music begins, softly at first then swelling and surging. A misty light

*hovering over the staircase now becomes stronger as JILL appears, walking slowly down, looking radiant, dressed in whatever suits her best. JOHNSON stares up at her in wonder and admiration. She stops about two-thirds of the way down, and smiles at him.)*

JILL. Who am I, Robert?

JOHNSON (*slowly at first but with mounting excitement*). You are Jill, my wife. And you are Jill, the mother of my children. And you are Jill, the girl I saw for the first time at a dance nearly thirty years ago. And you are Jill the girl who had not yet been to that dance, who had never seen me, who dreamed perhaps of a lover and a husband very different from me. You are all those, and something more as well, something even more than the Jill who went with me on that wedding journey to Switzerland, so young, so happy. You are the essential Jill, whom I was for ever finding, losing, then finding again. You are my love, the wonder and terror and delight of my heart.

JILL (*moving slowly down to him*). Because at last you say that, I am happy. And like you, I am at peace. How strange it is! We have no more peace in ourselves than you have, but when you find peace in us, then we find it too. Perhaps that is why God created us men and women. (*She turns to the window, where bright moonlight is streaming through.*) Look! What do you see?

JOHNSON (*wonderingly, happily*). The moon begins to

rise over the lake again, and the mountains are in deep shadow.

JILL. But already the highest peaks are silver.

JOHNSON. It's the same lake.

JILL. I remember every mountain top.

JOHNSON. We only had a fortnight there.

JILL (*hastily*). Less than that—twelve and half days.

JOHNSON (*happily*). We sat on the balcony, night after night, and watched that moonrise.

JILL. There was something about that lake—always—that caught at my heart—as you did, Robert.

JOHNSON. I felt then—and tried to say it too, but the words stuck in my throat——

JILL (*with laughing reproach*). Too many nice words stuck in that throat of yours, Robert.

JOHNSON. I know. I felt then that for once the world outside ourselves seemed to be the mirror of our hearts. (*To the scene outside.*) Good-bye.

JILL (*with a touch of alarm*). Why do you say that?

JOHNSON (*gently*). It seems to me to be fading. Perhaps a mist is coming over it. Sometimes, you remember, there were mists. (*The moonlight fades out, but as JILL goes closer to him, a warm sunlight begins to stream in, and she turns and sees it.*)

JILL (*looking out*). What do you see now?

JOHNSON (*staring*). Nothing much yet. Wait a minute, though. (*Ecstatically.*) Why, it's the little back garden of the bungalow, the first we ever had.



JILL (*quickly*). I can see my three rose bushes.

JOHNSON. Isn't my old deck-chair still out there?

JILL. Yes, and my gardening basket. I was so proud of that and really I didn't know a thing about gardening then.

JOHNSON. Lord!—I used to sit out there at the week-ends as if I were in the middle of a five hundred acre estate. And the way I used to trim that privet hedge!

JILL (*reproachfully, and suddenly taking the scene from the past into the present*). Oh!—Robert—you've left all that mess of stuff out there again. Look—that silly big ashtray and pipes and newspapers and that ridiculous old hat——

JOHNSON (*impatiently, also turning past into present*). Well, what does it matter? It's our garden and those are all my things.

JILL (*rather sharply now*). But they look so awful—just as if we didn't care how we looked——

JOHNSON (*more impatiently*). But we know we do care how we look—I mean, up to a point—but after all a garden's a place to enjoy yourself in—and——

JILL (*cutting in, sharply*). Yes, you've told me that a thousand times already. But it's no reason why a garden should look like a lumber room. And other people see it as well as ourselves—and goodness only knows what Mrs. Lee says about it.

JOHNSON (*exasperated*). But what the blazes does it

matter what Mrs. Lee says or thinks about our garden? First, you tell me you can't stand the woman——

JILL (*sharply*). But can't you see that's all the more reason why we shouldn't give her an excuse to criticise us——

JOHNSON (*almost shouting now, across that old gulf between the sexes*). No, I can't see. It all sounds unreasonable and dam' silly to me——

JILL (*angrily, betrayed again*). That's because you're so selfish you look at everything just from your own point of view——

JOHNSON (*angrily*). No, I don't.

JILL (*who by this time has been deserted by husband and children, jeered at by all the neighbours, stoned through the streets*). Yes, you do. You never really *think* about me——

(*But as they stand and glare at each other, the light from the window begins to fade, as if to reproach them. JILL turns, dismayed.*)

JILL. Oh—it's going.

JOHNSON (*miserably*). Serves me right! Jill!

JILL (*tearful but glad*). Robert!

(*As they console each other, a rich warm intimate light comes on in the corner where the table is. JILL sees the table and goes over, JOHNSON following her.*)

JILL (*looking at table and things on it*). I remember his—you know—so well.

JOHNSON. Do you?





WAITER (ALBERT). With the Landlord's compliments, sir.  
JOHNSON. We must drink his health. Jill—the Landlord's health! By the way, who is the  
Landlord?

JILL. Yes, don't you?

JOHNSON (*considering the table*). Well, I suppose I would—if I ever remembered such things. Seems all a bit familiar.

JILL. It's all from the third holiday we had after we were married, when Richard was just beginning to walk.

JOHNSON (*astonished*). Can you remember?

JILL. Yes, everything with us in it. Streets, houses, tables, chairs, dishes, knives and forks. All laid out for ever in an enchanted country. Ours.

(*They have now sat down at the table, and ALBERT appears with a tray of magnificent things to eat and a bottle of wine.*)

ALBERT. There you are, sir! Everything that you specially fancy, and all snug and cosy. I say all snug and cosy.

JOHNSON. Yes—grand, Albert!

ALBERT (*indicating wine*). With the landlord's compliments, sir.

JOHNSON. We must drink his health. Jill—the landlord's health! (*They drink.*) By the way, who *is* the landlord?

ALBERT (*confidentially*). Couldn't exactly say, sir, and that's a fact, but I've had my suspicions. I say I've had my suspicions.

JOHNSON. What are they?

JILL (*rather hastily*). No, Robert, don't let's bother about him now.

ALBERT. Quite right, ma'am. Besides, there's the message he sent down to be attended to.

JOHNSON. What message? To me?

ALBERT. That's right, sir. He said: "Ask Mr. Johnson what time and place he'd like this to be while he's having his supper."

JOHNSON (*bewildered*). What time and place?

JILL. Yes, Robert. You can choose. Only don't choose something before I knew you—or I'll be out of it.

JOHNSON. Good lord—no! (*Thinks a moment.*) Now wait a minute. You know, my cousin George Noble came in and said he'd introduce us, just as he did at that Christmas dance, long ago——

JILL (*eagerly*). When we first met?

JOHNSON. Yes. I thought it was going to happen all over again, but it didn't. Now that's what we'd like, Albert.

ALBERT (*going*). The Christmas dance—ve-ery good, sir.

JOHNSON (*calling*). But—Albert!

ALBERT (*halting*). Sir?

JOHNSON. Could everybody be there, this time?

ALBERT. I'll pass the message on, sir. (*Hurries out.*)

JOHNSON (*with just the two of them, snug at the table*). You see, Jill, that was the very beginning for us. And

we'll see the beginning again but now we shall know everything that came out of it. We'll be ourselves as we were then but we'll also be all the selves we've been since, so that we'll have *everything*.

JILL (*affectionately teasing*). Aren't you clever?

JOHNSON. Well, you must admit, it's a jolly good idea. Let's see—who gave that dance?

JILL (*promptly*). Some people called Williams.

JOHNSON. You remember everything.

JILL. I'm not likely to forget that. And the funny thing was, as I've told you before, I hardly knew them. And you didn't either, did you?

JOHNSON. No, they were friends of my uncle, George Noble's father. I spotted you the minute we arrived. You were waiting for somebody. I hung about, hoping somebody would introduce us——

JILL (*tenderly*). I know you did. And as a matter of fact I *wasn't* waiting for somebody. No, that's not true—I was. I was waiting for you.

(*As she puts a hand across the table and he takes it, the orchestra slides into the "Valse Bleu," the lovely greeny-blue, ghostly lights come on, illuminating the whole stage, and all the company come waltzing on from the back. There are the young people we saw before, and others too, and older people, all in the evening clothes of about 1912. In addition there are characters who have previously appeared in this Act, still wearing the same clothes as before, people like*

TOM, CLAYTON, MORRISON, *and even FREDa and RICHARD. Except for the corner where JILL and JOHNSON are sitting, the whole stage is filled with these dancing figures. JOHNSON now turns and looks at them, all happy and excited, like a schoolboy.*)

JOHNSON (*with mounting excitement*). Look—there's good old George. It was he who did the trick for us that night. . . . Why, there's Tom . . . was he there? He might have been, though. . . . And Mr. Clayton . . . he wasn't there, of course. . . . And old Morrison from my school . . . glorious idea bringing him in. . . . Look, Jill—your mother, having a roaring good time . . . do you remember how suspicious of me she was at first? . . . I'll bet Don Quixote's somewhere about. . . . I had a talk to him. . . . And look—Richard—*our* Richard—that's cheek, if you like, coming to dance at the party where his mother met his father! . . .

RICHARD (*calling from the crowd of dancers*). Why don't you two dance?

JOHNSON (*in high spirits*). Why not? (*He jumps up and moves forward, before turning.*) Come on, Jill—we'll show them.

(*But now when he turns the corner is dark and JILL is no longer there. He is first bewildered, then terribly distressed.*)

JOHNSON. Jill! Jill! Where are you? Jill!

(*He is now almost in the centre of the stage, not far*



*from the bottom of the staircase. The dancers are still, and the music has stopped. There is a moment's silence. Then comes the CLERGYMAN'S VOICE from somewhere far away.*

CLERGYMAN'S VOICE. . . . Lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. . . .

JOHNSON (*calling urgently among the deepening shadows*). Jill! Jill! Where are you? Jill!

*(The sombre theme, announced by heavy brass, that we have heard before is now heard again. THE FIGURE appears, tall, hooded, very impressive, on the staircase. A golden shaft of light, from below, illuminates him, and throws an immense shadow on the high curtain at the back. There is a steely light on JOHNSON'S face. The rest are in shadow.)*

THE FIGURE (*solemnly*). Robert Johnson, it is time for you to go.

THE CROWD (*drawing back, murmuring*). The landlord! The landlord!

THE FIGURE. Robert Johnson, you cannot stay here any longer.

JOHNSON (*urgently*). My wife was with me a moment ago. Now she's disappeared. I've lost her. And I must speak to her again.

THE FIGURE. There is no need.

JOHNSON (*very urgently*). Yes, I must.

THE FIGURE. Listen!

*(From somewhere far away, but very clear, come the*

*voices of FREDa and JILL exactly as they spoke at the end of the little scene in the hall.)*

FREDa's VOICE. Why—mother—you look different.

JILL's VOICE. I know, darling—and I feel different. You see, I know. I suddenly saw—quite clearly—everything's all right—really all right—*now*. . . .

THE FIGURE. You understand? She knows already.

JOHNSON. Can she read my mind?

THE FIGURE. Perhaps she reads a little further than your mind.

JOHNSON. You can pull back that hood now and show your face, my friend who calls me fool.

*(THE FIGURE pulls back the hood, the golden shaft of light grows stronger, and now instead of an indeterminate face there is the face of a handsome young man, like an Apollo.)*

THE FIGURE. Yes, both are true. I have called you a fool, and I am your friend. And now you have a debt to discharge here.

JOHNSON. You said it would cost me nothing.

THE FIGURE. I said no money was necessary.

JOHNSON. Then how can I pay you?

THE FIGURE (*gravely*). With thanks. And then it is good-bye, Robert.

*(All the people in the crowd, now in deep shadow, begin to drift away, and as they go we just catch their low confused voices saying: "Good-bye Robert" and "Good-bye Johnson" and "Good-bye, Good-bye.")*





THE FIGURE. Robert Johnson, it is time now.

*And then JOHNSON is left a solitary figure in this steely shaft of light, while THE FIGURE, shining and golden, waits above on the stairs.)*

JOHNSON (*with deep emotion*).

I have been a foolish, greedy and ignorant man;  
Yet I have had my time beneath the sun and stars;  
I have known the returning strength and sweetness  
of the seasons,

Blossom on the branch and the ripening of fruit,  
The deep rest of the grass, the salt of the sea,  
The frozen ecstasy of mountains.

The earth is nobler than the world we have built  
upon it;

The earth is long-suffering, solid, fruitful;  
The world still shifting, dark, half-evil.

But what have I done that I should have a better  
world,

Even though there is in me something that will  
not rest

Until it sees Paradise . . . ?

(*With very great emotion.*)

Farewell, all good things!

You will not remember me,

But I shall remember you. . . .

THE FIGURE (*gravely*). Robert Johnson, it is time  
now.

(*And here is the PORTER, standing just behind  
JOHNSON with his hat and overcoat and bag.*)

PORTER. Your things, sir. (*Helps him on with his coat.*)

JOHNSON (*now with his overcoat on, holding his hat and bag, with an echo of childish accents*). For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory . . . and God bless Jill and Freda and Richard . . . and all my friends—and—and—everybody . . . for ever and ever. . . . Amen. . . .

(*He puts on his hat and is now ready to go. He looks up at THE FIGURE, doubtfully.*)

JOHNSON (*hesitantly*). Is it—a long way?

THE FIGURE (*suddenly smiling like an angel*). I don't know, Robert.

JOHNSON (*awkwardly*). No . . . well . . . good-bye. . . .

(*A majestic theme has been announced, first only by the wood-wind. As JOHNSON still stands there, hesitating, the light on THE FIGURE fades, and then the whole staircase disappears, leaving JOHNSON alone. He looks very small, forlorn, for now the whole stage has been opened up to its maximum size, and there is nothing there but JOHNSON. The music marches on, with more and more instruments coming in. JOHNSON looks about him, shivering a little, and turning up the collar of his coat. And now there is a rapidly growing intense blue light; the high curtains have gone at the back, where it is bluer and bluer; until at last we see the glitter of stars in space, and against them the curve of the world's rim. As the*



Johnson, wearing his bowler hat and carrying his bag, slowly turns and walks towards that blue space and the shining constellations . . .





*brass blares out triumphantly and the drums roll and the cymbals clash, JOHNSON, wearing his bowler hat and carrying his bag, slowly turns and walks towards that blue space and the shining constellations, and the curtain comes down and the play is done.)*

## AND ALL ABOUT IT . . .

### I

For many years now I have used a small shiny black-backed note-book, which goes with me everywhere, even if only for one night away from home, and in which I jot down an idea—or the germ of an idea—as it occurs to me. The fifteen plays I have written began their life in that note-book, and I suppose there are in it still at least forty to fifty ideas, hints, suggestions, for other plays. I have just been looking there for the beginnings of *Johnson Over Jordan*, and have finally discovered them, in the following shape:

### SMITH

- (1) The Office
- (2) The Night Club
- (3) The Inn at the World's End

This entry is considerably earlier than any mention of the ideas that afterwards became *Time and the Conways* and *I Have Been Here Before*, although these two plays were actually running in London before the first draft

of *Johnson Over Jordan* was finished. I thought over the idea for a long time, and made odd notes, but it was not until the autumn of 1937, when I was lecturing in the United States, that I thought really hard. But during my lecture tour I had a great many long and rather tedious railway journeys to make, so that I had time to work out roughly many of the scenes and to make numerous notes. (Smith was now Johnson, simply because Smith had already appeared in several play titles and Johnson seemed a good name for an English Everyman.) When, in late November, I joined my family in Arizona, I set to work, all the more eagerly because the Theatre and lecturing had cut me off from writing for several months, and it was not long before the first draft was finished. Then, early in 1938, after returning from a visit to New York, where *Time and the Conways* was being produced, I completely rewrote *Johnson*, and though this revision formed the basis of the present text, I may be said to have been rewriting it ever since. The script I found myself faced with when I came to do this reading edition was easily the untidiest I have ever known, for not only were there dozens of cuts but also scores of scattered pages of added material or re-written scenes, so that the thing was like a jigsaw puzzle. And now I have done with it.

It has been probably most frequently described as "a play about Death." But it did not begin in my mind as a play about Death—for I am certain that when I scribbled in my note-book that entry about Smith and the three scenes at the office, the night club and the inn, I had no thought of taking my hero beyond the grave—and even now in its final shape I do not know that I should care to describe it as a play about Death or the After-life, though I cannot quarrel with those who do. Actually, what I wanted to do was to give an account, in dramatic form, of a man's life in a new way, taking an ordinary middle-class citizen of our time and then throwing a new light on him and his affairs, and giving to my record of his rather commonplace life an unusual depth and poignancy. I dislike the ordinary biographical play, with its easy amble of scenes, its obvious chronology, its rubber-stamp effects. Moreover, I had several other fish I wanted to fry.

The truth is, that Death and what follows it gave me not the basis of the play but its dramatic framework. It happened that I came upon Dr. Evans-Wentz's study of the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, in which I learned of the *Bardo*, the intermediate state that follows soon after death—"a prolonged dream-like

state, in what might be called the fourth dimension of space, filled with hallucinatory visions directly resultant from the mental-content of the percipient." According to this account of the matter, the dead man does not know that he no longer possesses a body of flesh and blood, and he mistakes characteristic thought-forms for genuinely objective entities, much as we do, I take it, in our dreams. There seems to me nothing unlikely in this, and possibly our dream-life, which has a quality very different from that of our waking life, gives us a foretaste of what is to come. But I hardly set foot inside the Tibetan *Bardo*, with its forty-nine symbolic days, its vast and terrible panoramas of thought-forms, including whole processions of illusory avenging deities, its elaborate machinery of Karma and re-birth. I imagined for my hero a far more modest and westernised *Bardo*.

In the first Act, in the Office, Johnson would be moved by anxiety, and the scene itself and everything that happened in it would be symbolic of such a man's anxieties and responsibilities. He would meet there purely symbolic figures, such as the Examiners, or people and situations from his own past recalled by such a mood. In the second Act—which turned out to be the most troublesome and, apart from one or two good moments, the least rewarding—he would be swayed by sensual, bestial and murderous tendencies, and here it would be almost all symbolism. Then,

having been purged by terror and remorse, in the third Act, at the Inn, he would discover his best self and those things that had quickened his mind and touched his heart, and until the very end there would be hardly any symbolism, but he would wander in and out of his own past, yet never wholly engulfed in it. At the end, the complete four-dimensional Johnson would say good-bye to everything familiar and of this life, and go out to a new adventure of living. From the first I saw this final and impressive picture—this man of our time, an ordinary citizen of the suburbs, a small but gallant figure against a huge background of blue space and glittering stars. The whole play leads up to that moment, and to be deeply moved by it and yet to pretend afterwards that what led up to it is of small account—as some critics were and did—seems to me to be hardly playing fair.

In order to give depth and perspective, physically and mentally, to the large dream-scenes of the *Bardo*, I decided to begin each Act with a short scene—acted in a very shallow front set—showing what was happening in the hall of Johnson's house during the time a funeral service was being held in a room just out of sight. (It is not true, as some people have suggested, that no such funeral services are held in private houses, for I have attended them myself). Only the first of these three scenes will be found in this text, because after our short run at the New Theatre the

ten days interval necessary to transfer the heavy production to the Saville Theatre gave me an opportunity as rare as it is precious to make some alterations in the text. Many playgoers, on edge after the first funeral scene, detested having to return to that atmosphere in Acts Two and Three. Again, audiences could not understand that the big Johnson scenes were supposed to be happening within the brief limits of a short funeral service, for it seemed to them that that service, like the play itself, was lasting all evening. So I dropped the funeral service after Act One, and went forward a day between each Act. This ruined the fine effect of cutting appropriate passages of the funeral service into Johnson's scenes, but otherwise there has been a definite gain.

So much, then, for *Johnson* as a "play about Death."

## 3

It had always seemed much more important to me as a play about life. Here, I wanted to say, is a man—and not an extraordinary man, but a fairly typical specimen of our contemporary kind. The human material should be deliberately commonplace. And for another good reason besides the *Everyman* motive. If your method of treatment is to be new, strange, rather difficult, then it is wise to use familiar material.

(This is the reason why, in another experimental play, *Music at Night*, I deliberately made use of familiar theatrical types—the self-made man, the cynical society beauty, and so forth.) It is dangerous to try and advance on all fronts at once. (It is dangerous in this country to try and advance on any front.) When I had made use of unfamiliar material, as in *Cornelius*, *Time and the Conways*, or *I Have Been Here Before*, I had stuck to a fairly conventional dramatic method. But now, with *Johnson*, and, later, with *Music At Night*, it was a complete change of method that interested me, and indeed the themes of these plays may perhaps be regarded as opportunities I gave myself to follow this new method.

What I wanted to do was to take my characters out of time, to present them four-dimensionally, so to speak. This is not an imposing description of the mere trick of messing about with the time order of scenes. Thus, I once saw in New York a successful piece by Kaufman and Hart called *Merrily We Roll Along*, in which the time order of the scenes had been reversed, so that we began with the central character as a cynical, disillusioned middle-aged man and ended with him as an idealistic and hopeful young student. Some people thought *Time and the Conways* owed everything to “a twist,” and that I had merely switched Acts Two and Three. An examination of the play will show that this is nonsense, and that my Act Three there has no



value whatever when it is not allowed to follow my Act Two. In short, I had made a real beginning in this play, but I had not taken its characters—except Kay in a sentence or two—out of time. You can only do this, of course, within a very unusual framework.

You can do it in a dream play—though this is not what Strindberg was after in his dream plays—because in our dreams we do actually lead a genuine, if very confused, four-dimensional existence. In dreams not only are we free of the usual limitations of time and space, not only do we return to our past and probably go forward to our future, but the self that apparently experiences these strange adventures is a more essential self, of no particular age. This is something more than the mere operation of memory, just as when Johnson in this play has his scenes with the schoolmasters, with his brother, with Clayton, with his wife and children, he is not merely remembering the past and reconstructing what he experienced then, though in one or two instances—e.g., the scenes with Clayton and Mrs. Gregg in Act One, or the scenes with Clayton and the doctor in Act Three—it does not amount to very much more. But what he is really doing is moving freely in and out of the past and recreating the experiences he finds there, as we do often in dreams. In many of the scenes, unless you realise that Johnson is playing a complicated double part, is back in the past and yet fundamentally out of

time altogether, you will miss any force and depth these scenes may have. To take an example: in the scene with his brother Tom in Act Three, Johnson is superficially once more the youth he was when Tom was a schoolboy, but he is also a mature man who knows that Tom was killed in the War. Again, in the scene with his children at the window, he is back again at some moment of time when they were all having a mountain holiday together and the children *did* appear at a window and chattered at him, but he is also the man who is out of our time altogether, who tells his children what he always wanted to tell them, who is finally saying good-bye to them.

This method, if successfully pursued, should bring what we see and hear on the stage very close to our own interior and secret life, to those dreams of ours so strange, moving, oddly significant, that they can make the day of waking life that follows them often seem flat and colourless. It has three serious drawbacks. The first, as I have already hinted, is the difficulty of finding an adequate dramatic framework for them. The second is that it makes enormous demands upon the producer and the actors, especially the actor playing the character who is out of time, for his own method has to be exceptionally fluid and subtle. (Here I was fortunate in Ralph Richardson, who knew instinctively what was required of him.) The third drawback is that it needs the right response

from the audience, who must be moved by something more than mere curiosity. The piece is not in the key to which their ears are accustomed. If they let go, or will not take hold, of the silken thread that leads them through the labyrinth, they are lost. What seems to others, more sympathetic or alert, to be unusually solid, searching, poignant, far nearer the stuff of our life than the ordinary run of dramatic entertainment, seems to these good folk all shapeless and pointless, a lot of pretentious nonsense. It is unfortunate, too, that many dramatic critics, especially the older ones who made a big effort years ago to fall into line with dramatists who were experimenting, have more fixed and rigid ideas of what a good play should be than ordinary, fairly intelligent members of the audience. Thus, the experts see even less than the laymen.

This explains what has puzzled many people I know, namely, the exceptionally wide difference of opinion among both critics and playgoers as to the merits of *Johnson*. To many, who do not necessarily dislike everything I do almost on principle, the play had neither form nor meaning, and they sat through it unmoved by anything but irritation or boredom. It was not—as I might be ready to confess myself—that I had not done my work with sufficient skill, but that, according to them, what I was trying to do was not worth doing. To others, of at least equal intelligence,

the play succeeded as we had hoped that it would, giving these people, many of whom have written giving us their impressions, not merely an evening's entertainment but a deeply felt experience. It is significant too perhaps—for I never remember it happening with any other play of mine—that it was the younger critics, on the whole, who responded, and the older critics who failed to respond.

## 4

There was still another reason why the play took the shape it did, for after all I could have followed an experimental method on the lines I have suggested and yet written a play on a much smaller scale. But for once I wanted to make full use of all the resources of the Theatre. Short of playing on a bare stage, nobody could have been much more austere than I had been in my demands on the Theatre. One simple set throughout and a few players were all that I had asked, time after time. It pays a dramatist to be modest in this fashion because it means that not only are the initial costs of production in the West End much smaller, but that touring, repertory, and amateur rights are more in demand. But it was always being pointed out—or, more often, hinted at—that the Theatre had all these wonderful resources that we modern serious

dramatists disdained to use, partly out of economy perhaps, but partly too, no doubt, because we did not really know how to use them. So I determined that for once I would let myself go, and bring in everything that the Theatre could do for me, including some ballet and plenty of good music.

It was not a trick to help the Box Office. We could not hope to pretend that it was a musical comedy, though it was obvious from the start that with a large cast of actors, ballet dancers, an unusually good orchestra in the pit, a tremendous costume plot, and very elaborate lighting effects, our expenses would be on the musical comedy scale. No, it was a disinterested attempt, first on my part, then afterwards on the part of my colleagues in the production, to give this play full benefit of *Theatre*. And here, nobody complained. Indeed, we were accused by some of giving them too much Theatre, of piling Pelion on Ossa, and even of painting and gilding the lily. The very rumour of our colossal preparations, which necessitated the co-operation of a great many specialists, months of work, and the spending of far, far too much money, was enough to prejudice in advance some stalwarts of austere naturalism, who had at one time considered me a man after their own heart, another ascetic of the playhouse.

Actually, I had been drifting away from naturalism, both in writing and in production, for some time.

Just as I was looking for a suitable framework for my "timeless" method, so too I wanted the kind of drama that would enable me now and again to break away from the flavourless patter of modern realistic English dialogue. (It is this that drives modern English dramatists into contracts for writing films in Hollywood, into "the celluloid mines" as an American dramatist calls them; for the Americans have their pungent slang to work with, the French their wit, the Irish—lucky fellows—their own highly rhythmical speech; but the English—well, I mean to say, really, old boy!) If I could also cut out the dead wood of dialogue that makes at least half the evening at most English plays a sheer waste of time ("Mr. Jones, have you had tea?" "No, thanks, but please don't trouble." "It's no trouble at all, is it, Agnes?" "No, dear." "Then ring for tea." "Oh, Mary, tea, please." And so on, and so forth), then so much the better, although from the first I had contrived, chiefly by eliminating servants and social chat, to have the very minimum of this dreary stuff. I had also, before *Johnson*, begun to cheat naturalism, notably in *I Have Been Here Before*, which gradually, as the play goes on, takes leave of the purely realistic method in its dialogue, so that the people talk as they could not possibly talk in real life. But I wanted, without having to write biographical-historical dramas in blank verse or keep a dramatic antique shop, much more of this heightening of

speech, for my own satisfaction and that of my actors—or chief actor—and also, I hoped, for that of the audience, which can have all the small-change of dialogue it wants at the pictures.

It is always assumed that what the films do best is large-scale pageantry, but actually, when they are written and directed intelligently, what they do best is very small-scale realism. And the films have only to become rather more intelligent and sensitive to drive naturalism clean out of the Theatre, which cannot hope to compete with them. The film can show you the cup and saucer trembling in Mr. Jones's hand, or the dubious face of Agnes as she peers behind the teapot lid. But if it is a question of heightened speech, revealing the very soul of Mr. Jones or Agnes, then the Theatre must win, and along this line it may have to fight its battle. There is no doubt that the first great onslaught of naturalism cleared a great deal of turgid nonsense—false situations, false writing, false acting—out of the Theatre; and for certain themes the naturalistic technique, apparently removing the wall from a neighbouring house and allowing you to see and hear what is happening in there, will always remain the best; but an enlargement of method and scale should not be denied us, for the sake of the more literate dramatist, of the actor with some greatness in him, of the Theatre itself. Looking, the other day, through Lena Ashwell's autobiography, I came across

some remarks of hers about the tradition in which Irving worked at the Lyceum:

It was the tradition that had grown up in the romantic poetic drama: the painting was done on a large canvas and involved the development of concentrated imagination. The greatness of tragedy depended on the spiritual stature of the artists and the emotional capacity to give the picture life. The design was not to give a photograph of petty details and concerns, but to "lift the mirror up to" the whole nature and the struggles of the soul, so that the audience might be transported to the realm where failure and suffering became filled with beauty and where evil became pitiful even in its success. . . .

and I thought it would not be a bad thing if we began to work on these larger lines again, not returning to an old mode but lifting what we have achieved since to a greater height. We are frequently told—notably by Mr. Ashley Dukes—that this will only happen when our poets write for the Theatre. But our poets have always written for the Theatre—the Nineteenth Century is strewn with their unplayed or unplayable masterpieces—and I would rather say we shall accomplish this enlargement when our dramatists are allowed to be more poetical. So I did not feel resentful when several critics of



*Johnson* said it was a pity I was no poet. At least they were sitting in front of a modern play and asking for poetry.

## 5

In addition to the usual reasons, there were two special reasons why those of us who were working on this play and its production thought it important that it should succeed. The first was that both the play and its production were unusually experimental, representing a very genuine attempt to do something new. I certainly had no model before me for the writing of it, and as I know every step that was taken in the production, which took shape in Basil Dean's mind steadily throughout last autumn, I am equally certain that there was no model for the production. The experiment, then, must be granted. And it happens that our London Theatre is about the least experimental in the world, and is always badly in need of a production that is not exactly like all the last two hundred-and-one productions. We have great theatrical activity in our capital—keeping more theatres open even than New York does—but it is mostly activity of a kind that the intelligent foreign visitor finds it more polite to ignore. He believes, not without excuse, that we have many theatres but no

Theatre. Every once in a while, one of our dramatic critics will have a look at New York or Moscow and return to enquire in print why our dramatists are so lacking in originality and vitality. Nevertheless, that will probably not prevent him from waiting with a club for any little experiment to show its nose. Here, then, was a Theatre that was badly in need of experiment, and here was the experiment.

The second reason had to do with the sad times in which we live. Ever since last September the London public had been living in a state of tension, taut with anxiety in a darkening tragic world. It needed release, and we hoped that if this production were successful, it would help people to obtain release. Yes, catharsis was the word. I, for one, was not against people trying to forget their troubles and anxieties and all the steadily accumulating horrors of life in the Twentieth Century in any bit of theatrical triviality they fancied. I am all for fun and nonsense, in or out of the theatres. But it is obviously stupid and dangerous for people who are beginning to think and feel tragically to pass all their leisure hours in a tiny tinsel world. If we could take their minds away from their own immediate concerns and yet at the same time make them feel deeply in the playhouse, provide them with a searching experience, then we might do them all a power of good, and at the same time clear a way through the thickening jungle of mass-produced

trivialities for bigger and nobler work than ours. Every serious dramatist, producer and player in this country must face something that is like a Great Wall of China between himself and a large public, and this is the notion that a visit to a theatre is a larky night out and—if you are one of the stalls public—a dinner-supper-white-tie affair. If every time the English read a decent book, they had to collect a party, put on their best clothes, dine here and sup there, very soon there would be few decent books read or published. The films, starting as they did almost in the gutter, were really fortunate never to be tangled in these absurd conventions of parties and fine clothes and nights out. All this has been said before, but what makes it more important now is that the dark and dangerous times have created a really deep need for serious and searching drama, capable of moving the spectator profoundly. One day perhaps the one government in the world that does nothing for the drama except tax it may realise that its citizens would have been healthier-minded and better able to attend to their duties if they had been purged by the pity and terror created by good dramatic art. But as things are going in our Theatre, there is more pity and terror behind the scenes than in front of them.

## 6

This last section shall tell what actually happened, not altogether out of garrulous egoism, but because it is possible that soon we may have no Theatre left and it is easier for books to survive than playhouses. In short, this brief record may one day revive memories for some playgoer who no longer has any plays. The arrangements to produce *Johnson* were completed last summer, more than six months before the play was actually put on; but Ralph Richardson was busy filming, and he had been enthusiastic about the play after the very first sight of the script, when I was still in America, and we knew that it was worth while losing the autumn season to wait for him. Basil Dean went forward with his elaborate plans, which involved the most formidable round-table conferences with designers, musicians, electricians. Rehearsals began early in the New Year and lasted six weeks. The final days were unusually long and arduous, for the music and ballet had to be co-ordinated with the acting, and the lighting and the back-stage work were very heavy. Meanwhile, advance interest, both in the Press and at the box office, was exceptionally good. We opened on Ash Wednesday at the New Theatre. The first night audience seemed bewildered, but at the end they stayed to give us a great many curtain calls. The notices

next morning were not bad; indeed, one by Lionel Hale in the *News Chronicle* was very good; and the "libraries" came and we did a reasonably good "deal" with them. The evening paper notices were silly. The Sunday press was mixed. The box office was worried now because our advance bookings were poor and our more expensive seats—especially the twelve-and-sixpenny stalls—very thinly occupied; though already the cheaper seats were sold out at each performance. Never at the worst did we play to really low figures, but the trouble was that it had cost us additional capital—and about all we had to spare between us—to pay the costs of production, and our weekly expenses were so high that we could not afford to stand a loss every week very long. So we gave preliminary notice to the theatre, the orchestra, etc. The news got out at once. *Johnson* had failed—and was coming off on Saturday week. Immediately the box office was besieged, and throughout the following week we played to packed and enthusiastic houses. (Though even now the "fashionables," who keep West End plays going in the early weeks of a run, were absent.) At the same time, letters were pouring in to me by every post from playgoers who were enthusiastic about the play and said it simply could not be taken off. We decided that it should not be taken off, but transferred to another theatre. This was a more courageous decision than would first appear,

because, owing to our elaborate lighting and back-stage arrangements, there would be several days work for a gang of men at each theatre, and if we had more rehearsals, as we planned to do, then this transfer would cost us nearly another thousand pounds. And business generally in the Theatre was terrible, and at any moment another crisis would be upon us. But we found a rather larger and much newer theatre, the Saville, and moved in; and one of the first things we did there was to do away with the twelve-and-sixpenny stalls and to arrange that every seat in the place could be booked, from two shillings to ten-and-sixpence.

(Please remember that a sixth of this money goes to the Inland Revenue as Entertainment Tax. Also, please remember that though we had been working for months and months and had spent thousands and thousands of pounds, so far we had not made a penny. But the Government had already made a good many hundreds out of our efforts and losses. In short, not only was our enterprise not being treated intelligently as a contribution to art, but it was not even being fairly treated as part of an industry. Many people write to me complaining that the Theatre is too expensive. Yet it is a fact that in most theatres the management does not take in any more per seat than it did before the War, yet, as everybody knows, all expenses are two and three times what they were before the War. That may be true, some people

retort, but the fact remains that—for us—*the Theatre is too expensive*. Can prices be reduced? Yes, they can, after the most drastic economies, but only successfully if the public will co-operate. To begin with, we have to spend too much merely telling the public, chiefly through newspaper advertisements, costing each theatre about a hundred pounds a week, where we are and what time the curtain goes up. Then again, at these reduced prices we must have our theatre almost full at every performance, for if at these prices playgoers are still going to stay away because the weather is too bad or too good, because there is something exciting on the wireless, then we simply cannot go on, and the serious Theatre, which even now is not paying its way, will altogether vanish. Nor do I apologise for these sordid facts appearing in the middle of my account of what happened to *Johnson*, for the sooner playgoers understand these things the better it will be for all of us.)

So *Johnson Over Jordan* started all over again at the Saville, and at the time of writing, in spite of crisis news and poor theatrical business generally, it is there yet, though of course I cannot say how long it will remain there. No play of mine—and I have had more than a dozen produced—has had such a curious history. First we were not allowed to keep it running, then we were not allowed to take it off. Some critics said it was almost worthless. Others said it was my very

best work. Many playgoers refuse to go near it. Others have gone over and over again. (While we were still running at the New Theatre, a man rang up to say that he and his wife had already—within a fortnight or so—seen it *six times*.) I have never, about anything I have ever done, play or book, had so many letters in the same period of time as I have had about *Johnson*. And many of these letters came from fellow-writers—dramatists, novelists, poets, critics—and from editors, musicians, civil servants, scholars. And almost all these people do not discuss or praise it simply as a play, but refer to it, over and over again, as a deeply felt experience. This fact, added to what I have seen and heard for myself in the theatre, more than justifies and repays us for all the work that had to be done. And I hope this glimpse of what went on behind the scenes, though it tells nothing of the hopes and fears of all the people engaged in the production, will not be without value, for just as—at this time of writing—the world is in a sad state, so is our serious Theatre, and any light that is thrown on the conditions of work in that Theatre must do less harm than good. For myself, I regret nothing so far as *Johnson* is concerned, but whether I am prepared to go through it all over and over again under the same conditions is another matter.



## 7

Whatever the conditions may be in our modern English Theatre, however, there is no doubt in my mind about the splendid eagerness and loyalty of most of the people who have to work under those conditions. This production, with its innumerable difficulties, its long and arduous rehearsals and (during the transfer) re-rehearsals, severely taxed the energy and patience of all the people engaged in it, and their response warmed one's heart and made one wish all the more that the Theatre itself was not more worthy of their devotion. And here, in conclusion, is a list of them, with their author's grateful thanks:

Basil Dean (*producer*).

Benjamin Britten (*composer of all the original music*).

Ernest Irving (*selected, arranged, conducted all the other music*).

Edward Carrick (*decor*).

Elizabeth Haffenden (*masks and costumes*).

Antony Tudor (*ballets*).

Ralph Richardson (*Johnson*).

Edna Best (*Jill*).

Richard Ainley (*The Figure*).

George Hayes (*Second Examiner, Headwaiter Barman*).

Meadows White (*Convict, Charlie, Albert Goop*).

Victoria Hopper (*Freda at New*).

Betty Marsden (*Freda at Saville*).

Christopher Quest (*Richard*).

Henry Hallatt (*Clergyman, Don Quixote*).

Stafford Hilliard (*First Old Man, Morrison*).

Wilfred Babbage (*Noble, Schoolmaster*).

Ernest Borrow (*Clayton*).

Lawrence Baskcomb (*First Examiner, Porker*).

Emma Trechman (*Madame Vulture*).

Tarver Penna (*Second Old Man, Barman, Doctor*).

Violet Blyth Pratt (*Mrs. Gregg*).

Betty Shale (*Stout Woman*).

Albert Chevalier (*Undertaker, Policeman, Porter*).

Rita Varian (*Agnes at Saville*).

Louise Frodsham (*Agnes at New*).

Hilary Pritchard (*Clerk at Saville*).

Jack Lambert (*Clerk and Porter at New*).

Grey Blake (*Tom*).

Larry Silverstone (*Newsboy, Clown-waiter*).

Michael Rose (*Newsboy, Waiter*).

Pamela Blake (*Guest, etc.*).

BALLET.—Eileen Baker, Celia Franks, Aase Nissen, Billie Lees, Vera Lavrova. Jack Menn, Robert Durning, Rex Reid, Tony Kelly, Charles Boyd, Guy Massey.

- ORCHESTRA.—*Leader:* Melsa  
*Violins:* Montague Brearley  
George Whitaker  
Stephen Evans  
*Violas:* Leonard Rubens  
Adolph Borsdorf  
*Violoncello:* Cedric Sharpe  
*Bass:* George Yates  
*Flute and*  
*Piccolo:* Gilbert Barton  
*Oboe:* Evelyn Rothwell  
*Clarinets:* Charles Draper  
George Garside  
*Bassoon:* Paul Draper  
*Trumpets:* John Cozens  
Peter Wilson  
*Trombone:* William Lover  
*Percussion:* Clarence O'Neill  
*Pianoforte:* James Walker  
*Conductor:* Ernest Irving

Basil Dearden (*Production Manager*).

Allan Davis (*Stage Manager*).

G. Del Strother (*Assistant Stage Manager*).

W. Lorraine (*Head Electrician*).

And to all these must be added, last but certainly not least, my partners and friends,  
A. D. Peters and W. N. Roughead.

POSTSCRIPT.—*Since the above was written the play has been taken off, on May 6, 1939. As soon as we announced the final performances there was the same rush to the box office and we had packed houses. We were implored to keep it on, and the theatre management offered to run it at their own risk, but we felt that we could not change our minds again. The many letters I have recently received convince me that for once it is true that a hostile or stupid press badly damaged a play's chances. Nor did we ever succeed in capturing the interest of the well-to-do play-going public. (From first to last our cheaper seats were filled.) On the very next day after Johnson Over Jordan appeared, I was discussing its production abroad with the director of a state theatre. And the fate of this play has left me more firmly convinced than ever that our whole method of serious theatrical production in this country will have to be changed or very soon there will not be left us even a glimmer of dramatic art.*